



## **The Waitress Next Door by Christina Sana**

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**Summary:** The middle school Snow Ball doesn't mean much to a Katherine Tracy; it's just another evening shift at Ronnie's Diner. But then an old friend walks through the door, and Katherine's shift — and the rest of the school year — ends up being a bit more eventful than she'd planned.

# 1. Chapter 1

This time of night was always slow.

Or maybe it just seemed slow, now that the dance had started over at the middle school, so none of the diner's booths were bursting with 7th graders, and the barstools were no longer occupied by dutiful parents/chauffeurs, gulping coffee and picking up the tab.

They had a bussers on hand tonight, which Katherine was grateful for. It wasn't like any part of this waitressing gig was a 'favorite', but clearing off tables was definitely low on the list of ways she wanted to spend her night. Scraping half eaten burgers and globs of ketchup into the trashcan before dumping dishes in the sink in the kitchen...no thank you, she'd rather be engaged in the highly complex and intellectual task of refilling salt shakers and charming customers for bigger tips. But at least her hands weren't inexplicably sticky.

*Another Saturday night for the books.*

The bell over the door rang, but Katherine didn't turn from the back booth, carefully screwing the lid back on a pepper shaker. The sign said 'seat yourself' and, if she were lucky, one of the bussers-was Danny the one on duty tonight?- could start his order.

"Table four, Katherine!"

Apparently she wasn't lucky.

"Just a second," she called back to Frank, the diner's overnight cook.

She securing the lid and brushed stray pepper dust off the table onto the floor. After all, she was the one who'd wipe it up later anyways. Katherine straightened her apron and headed to table four.

And froze.

Then pivoted and headed back to the kitchen, swinging the gray door open to find one Danny Wynette dunking a stained dishtowel into a 'clean' bucket of 'soapy' water.

"Hey Danny," she said cheerfully, "slow night, right?"

"Yep," he said noncommittally, wrenching the towel and sending a stream of cloudy water back into the bucket.

"I super appreciate your help though. You must be kinda bored of clearing tables though, right?"

The pre-teen's brow furrowed. "Okay, what do you want, Katherine?"

She dropped the act and held her hands out in an exaggerated plea. She was a couple of years older than most of the bussers, but that seniority didn't buy her much. "Take table four for me? I'll finish clearing off your section?"

"Why, who's at table four?" Danny dropped the towel in the bucket, and craned his neck to see around her, through the window in the kitchen door.

"And I'll wipe the rest of the tables?" she pushed her luck.

He shrugged and dropped the towel in the bucket, stepping around her.

Katherine breathed a sigh of relief. She bent to pick up the discarded towel, before the kitchen door swung open again.

"Nice try," a freckled arm grabbed it before she could,. "You think I want to wait on Steve Harrington any more than you do?"

"Oh come on, he's a cool guy-" she tried.

"Okay, then you wait on his table?"

"But I asked you."

"And I say hard pass. He's been mixed up in some crazy stuff this last year...why can't you just take it?"

*Because it's always weird to wait on anyone in my class.*

*Because whatever is going on with him and Nancy and Jonathan makes the whole school confused.*

*And somewhat nervous.*

*Also I haven't talked to him in like seven years.*

"Can't you please, just this once-"

"Nope. And you know why not?" Danny slapped the towel against the side of the bucket and turned, spraying water, "Because it's above my paygrade."

She glared at him, yanking a pencil out of her hair. "Fine. I was going to let you keep the tip and everything."

"Have funnnn," he called after her, clearly not mourning the loss.

Telling herself not to overthink things, Katherine cleared her throat as she got to table four. "Welcome to Ronnie's diner, how can I help you today?" she recited.

Nothing.

He was staring at his folded hands on the table in front of him, frowning slightly. His leg was bouncing and the three together - focused stare, folded hands, nervous leg - meant he was thinking. His hair was bouncing from the movement. Katherine cleared her throat again to try to get him out of it gently.

That didn't work either.

She flipped the pencil around and poked the arm of his sweatshirt with the eraser. "Hey Harrington, tap water okay? Or do you want coffee?"

Steve started and looked at her. He didn't so much recognize her as he did register that he was in a diner by himself at 8pm on a Saturday night and his waitress was his next door neighbor.

"Kat, hi. Um," he released his hands and set them on the table, drumming them on either side of the menu. "Could I get a shake actually?"

"Sure," she flipped open her notebook, "Strawberry, vanilla,

chocolate, banana, chocolate banana, chocolate strawberry, or Orange Julius."

She started writing even as she rattled off the flavors. 'Chocolate', she wrote.

"Chocolate," he said. "Thanks."

She nodded. "Are you eating or just the shake?"

He tapped the table again. "Can I get a second to look it over?"

"Yeah. Chicken and waffles are the special this weekend; it's 4 bucks and it'd include the shake."

He folded the menu back up, handing it up to her. "Works for me."

She tucked the menu under her arm, finishing writing. "Got it."

"Thanks."

"Sure."

*That...actually wasn't that weird.*

It wasn't like normal, or anything, it just wasn't awkward. Which was a mercy.

Katherine ripped out the page and stuck it in the ticket holder, dinging the little bell.

She ran the check for table 17, stacked the plates for Danny, and made a face at table 6's tip. If it could be called that. She dumped it in her apron pocket and headed back to the counter when Frank rang the bell for her.

"Chocolate shake," she announced, sliding the glass across the table and plunking down the accompanying straw and spoon.

A couple of minutes later, she was stuffing napkins in the holder at table three. She tried not to notice, but she did: he hadn't touched the shake.

He was back in his leg bouncing, finger crossed pose.

Katherine bit her lip.

She had no tables, no checks, no bussing. She could probably make a case for continuing with napkins but it was her third round in two hours and the holders were practically brimming anyways...

She set the box of napkins on table 3 and moved around the edge of the booth, sliding opposite of Steve.

"Look," she pulled the at the bottom 5/6 of the paper wrapper of the straw, sticking it into the milkshake and then removing the remaining sixth without touching it, "It really isn't my business if this melts all over the table; it's Danny's job to wipe it off anyways. But you should probably at least try it, or Frank will get offended."

Frank neither wondered nor cared how his customers found the milkshakes to be, but it was the best she could do.

Steve looked back at the kitchen and shook his head, as if clearing it. "Oh, right. Sorry."

Katherine considered him, picking up the paper wrapping and fiddling with it absently. "Also none of my business, but you're okay, right?"

"Yeah, course. Why wouldn't I be?" He shrugged and slid the milkshake to in front of himself.

She folded the paper, tilting her head. "Employee loyalty aside, Ronnie's is hardly a happening place to be."

He shrugged again. "Maybe I really wanted a milkshake."

"Sonic's a lot closer."

"Well I was out this way."

"What's out this way? It's just the school..." She trailed off.

Everyone knew Nancy Wheeler was volunteering at the middle school

dance; she'd been hanging up flyers for the past month all across campus, trying to convince other do-gooders to join her, so the kids could have more teens and less teachers at the dance.

Steve didn't say anything, and was focusing very intently on his shake. "This is really good, you know-"

"Steve, what were you doing at the dance?"

"I wasn't at the dance."

"Sure you weren't."

"I wasn't."

"Mmhhh. What color was her dress?"

He picked up the spoon, jabbing it in the shake. "Purple. You happy?"

"You know how creepy that is, right?"

"Not like I owe you an explanation, but I wasn't there for her; I was dropping off a friend."

*Right. One of Nancy's brother's flock of friends. Because that's healthy.*

"Of course."

Steve shoved the shake away from himself. "What do you want, Kat?"

She didn't know.

They hadn't been friends for years, right around when he started hanging out with Tommy and Carol. Company like that killed a friendship pretty quickly.

Frank rang the bell; the chicken and waffles were done.

She slid out of the booth.

"Syrup's at the end; by the napkins," she said briskly when she returned, sliding the plate onto the table. "Careful, it's hot."



"Thanks."

Neither of them looked at the other, and Katherine went back to the napkins. She'd finished the whole diner when she looked back at table four. He'd taken maybe three bites of the meal.

*It's none of your business.*

She sighed, walking back to the kitchen.

"Can I get a takeout box, Frank?" she asked through the window.

The cook peered out at the empty diner, then slid a bag and cup as well as the box up onto the counter. Smiling her thanks, Katherine pulled them down.

She stopped by the register to pull up Steve's ticket, then she hesitated. Though it was slow now, it'd been mayhem before. And parents were always good tippers. She looked over at table four; Steve's back was frozen again, his hair shaking with his leg. She opened the register and slid a \$5 from her apron into it, impaling the receipt on the spindle file.

She walked the takeout box over to the table. "The waffle won't reheat very well, but cold fried chicken is just as good as hot, right?"

He looked up, for the third time seeming to be surprised to be in a diner. "Right," he echoed automatically, taking the box. "Uh, thanks. You can bring the check whenever."

She waved a hand, tucking her hair behind her ear. "Nah, don't worry about it."

He blinked, then shook his head. "Seriously, Kat, what do I owe you?"

"Seriously, Steve," she parroted. "Don't worry about it."

He looked like he was about to protest again, which she just really wasn't ready for. She had three more hours in her shift, then another 30 minutes folding silverware and windex-ing the windows, before she could go home; at this point it was just a matter of the path of least resistance. "It's not a romantic thing, okay. You've had a rough

couple of weeks...months...year, I guess, actually. And if you're in here on a Saturday night, by yourself, then the least I can do is cover it with tips. Not a big deal."

"Kat, you can't-

"Nobody calls me that anymore."

She hadn't meant it to be rude, but she certainly didn't sound kind. Either way, Steve stopped talking. He started transferring food into the takeout box, then set his cutlery down. Eventually, he tilted his head back to look up at her. "It's been a while hasn't it?"

She supposed she was supposed to know the days and minutes, but she really didn't. Life hadn't stopped when she and Steve Harrington had parted ways; it had just rerouted. They'd found new friends, friends that took them down different paths. And she had been okay, she was okay; he hadn't been. Then he'd found Nancy, and it seemed like he might be again. But now that Nancy wasn't exactly in the picture...

"More than a couple of weeks," she said, gently.

The corners of his mouth turned up slightly. "When did we get to be seniors?"

She smiled reluctantly. "I'm sure it'll sink in, right about the time we walk across that stage."

"You're probably right."

"Always am. You sticking around after you graduate?"

His eyebrows rose and fell quickly as he exhaled slowly. "That's the golden question. You?"

"Community college. At least for a bit. I've never been out of Hawkins for longer than Christmas...I don't want to leave too quickly and then have to come back just as fast, you know? Maybe somewhere dramatic to actually get a degree, though."

"That's smart. Where would you go?"

"Not California."

Steve choked on the milkshake and Katherine grinned innocently, handing him a napkin. "You don't have to chug that; Frank gave you a takeaway cup, too."

"That's awfully kind of him."

"I thought so," she hesitated, "Speaking of which, how is your eye?"

He waved his fingers in front of his face. "No longer purple."

She paused again. "Word got around about all that. It was pretty decent of you."

He ran a hand through his hair quickly. "Don't know who you're listening to; I didn't do much, other than play punching bag."

"Better you than those kids."

He didn't say anything to that, and Katherine finished scraping the plate into the takeout box. She shifted on her feet; she had to say it. "I'm sorry about you and Nancy," she blurted.

She meant it.

Nancy was the best thing that had ever happened to Steve Harrington. Maybe Carol and Tommy didn't see it, but they were crap friends to Steve anyways. He'd been happy with Nancy, everyone could see that. Just like they saw how distinctly un-happy he was without her.

Steve looked back at the table, nodding slowly. "Yeah, me too."

Katherine fiddled with the tie on her apron. "You're going to be okay."

"Sure hope so."

"You will be," she said decisively.

He looked back up at her, and he shrugged, almost smiling. "Okay, I

will be."

She nodded curtly. "That's the spirit. And, while I'm in an advice giving mood...as good as whatever weird babysitter/surrogate dad routine you're pulling with those kids is, you should work at finding yourself some company over the age of 12."

"They're 13."

She tilted her head and he winced. "Point taken."

He swept the box and cup into the brown paper bag; she stepped aside to let him get out of the booth. He unfolded himself out of the booth, pulled his jacket after him, going through the pockets. "So, what. Are you offering?"

*I wasn't.*

She really hadn't been. Years ago, she'd dreamed of a moment like this: Steve Harrington, heart broken by a girl who chose another, coming back to her. But now...she'd buried the crush a lifetime ago. Katherine was surprised that when she looked at Steve, she didn't see her grade school crush, or her neighbor who thought moving up meant stepping over. All she could see was a man whom she barely recognized, someone who was hurting, someone who was helping others instead of fixing himself. Someone who genuinely needed a friend.

*I wasn't offering, but I am now.*

"I don't know," Katherine sighed dramatically, gesturing around her at the empty diner, "I'm a busy woman."

Steve rolled his eyes. "Whatever. Take this."

He held out his fist, palm down and she frowned at it. "What is it?"

He wiggled his wrist and she narrowed her eyes, but obediently held her hand up underneath his. He unclenched his fist and a \$10 bill fell into her hand.

"No, Steve, I already told you I covered it."

He shrugged into his jacket. "Okay, then you just got a really great tip."

"That's an understatement; it's literally a 250% tip."

"Guess I don't have to ask how you did on the SAT."

"Steve, you know I can't take this, come on," she held it out to him.

He looked at her, then took the bill back, folded it, and wedged it under one of the plates.

"You can take it, or Danny can find it when he busses the table." He grabbed the takeout bag, and did the weird clicked-teeth-plus-exaggerated-wink that guys like Steve reserved for their perfect *gotcha* moment. "See you Monday, Kat."

"You forgot the finger gun," she muttered after him.

She slipped the ten from under the plates into her apron, and carried the plates to Danny. He was sitting beside the bucket, clearly as over this shift as she was. He might've been actually asleep. She reached over him and grabbed the towel, heading back to table four. Outside, a maroon BMW revved its engine, and pulled out of the lot. Katherine shook her head, swiping the towel around the table, and not bothering to check her smile.

*See you Monday, Steve Harrington.*

## 2. Chapter 2

"The entire thing is red."

Josie materialized in the hall by the lockers, shaking her essay for emphasis. Katherine reached into her locker for her brown paper bag lunch, then smiled pointedly at her friend. "Hey, Josie, how was science? Did you see Matt's haircut? What did Mr. Keating say about the Gov final?"

"Oh, right, yeah." Josie had a habit of skipping pleasantries, and she'd wanted to work on small talk so she'd do better on college interviews. "Um, it was fine, which Matt got a haircut?, and it's cumulative."

"Crawford," Katherine shut her locker, "and isn't that just peachy."

Josie blinked. "We should have all conversations in parallel; that was really efficient."

They stopped at Josie's locker next, so the blonde could grab her lunch, then continued on to the cafeteria. Josie handed her bag to Katherine, so she could clasp the essay with both hands, and regard it with disbelief. "Efficiency aside, how can you do this to me, Katherine? I have to redo it before fifth period, and I was hoping to do something else in study hall."

Katherine lifted her shoulders. "Look, would you rather I mark it up or Ms. Snyder mark it up?"

Josie made a face. "You, of course. But is it really that awful?"

"It's not awful, Jo, it just could be better."

"I guess," Her friend sighed dramatically, then stuffed the paper under her arm without ceremony, reaching for her lunch. "Thanks for doing it for me."

"Thank me when you get the grade back."

Their normal table had discarded posters lying over it, so Katherine followed Josie to a table on the outskirts of the cafeteria. She slid

onto one of the red stools, propping her feet up on the bar connecting her stool to the table. The rumble of conversation rose as the cafeteria filled with students around them.

"So did you end up chaperoning on Saturday?" Katherine swiped an apple from her bag, inspecting the side of it before taking a bite.

"You mean for the middle school thing?" Josie was twirling pretzel sticks around her fingers like pencils. "Yeah. Hannah wanted me to do her makeup so I was already somewhat involved, and I convinced Mom to buy me a new dress; I think she went along with it so she didn't have to go."

"Is the dress cute?"

"Incoming."

"What?"

"Incoming!" Josie sang, and two trays slapped down on the table. Letterman jackets were tossed on backpacks on the floor, and the table lurched as the twins sat.

"Hi Joel; hi Jeff," Josie chirped.

The twins were both solid guys, good friends, better football players. Joel was the taller of the two and Jeff was the one who was in love with Josie, who of course, had no idea. Katherine was sworn to secrecy, but she didn't mind. If Jeff had the guts to say anything about it before they graduated, they'd be a cute couple.

She recognized a strawberry blonde mop of hair, and waved Travis over. He pushed his glasses up on his nose when he saw them, and headed their way. He was about to sit next in the seat between Joel and Katherine when Sofia materialized out of nowhere, and practically dove for the spot. If Jeff was the pining sort, Sofia was the opposite; she was determined to have Joel take her to senior prom in the spring. Travis looked amused, and moved to the other side of the table. There was room for eight, but it was only ever the six of them.

"Did you guys see Matt's new look?" Sofia asked, flipping her own dark hair over her shoulder.

"Which Matt?" Jeff asked, more for politeness than curiosity.

"Crawford, right?" Josie raised an eyebrow at Katherine who nodded.

"Yep," she finished her apple, "And I can confirm that it's a sight."

Sofia snorted. "It's a monstrosity, is what it is."

Josie craned her neck to look around the cafeteria. "I haven't seen him yet this morning, but you're the second person to ask me about it."

"It might be more subtle if you stood," Travis said matter-of-factly, and Josie scowled at him, but didn't stop looking. When she found him, her eyes widened.

"Oh my god, ew, why would he cut it like that?"

They all turned (except for Travis, who face-palmed emphatically) and watched as Matt Crawford walked across the cafeteria. To sit down with at the basketball table. There were fist bumps and chin raises all around, and Katherine turned back to the table, not bothering to hide her distaste.

Sofia's expression was equally disapproving. "This has been your daily reminder that some people think it's cool to be a self-obsessed dirtbag, and will even go so far as to mimic your ugly mullet," she intoned like she was reporting the evening news, "Now back to you in the studio."

Everyone was silent for a moment, then Josie pursed her lips. "Do you think he actually...like his sister-"

"Yes," the rest of the table said.

"I figured," she said quietly. "Wishful thinking, I guess."

Everyone fiddled with their lunches for a moment.

"As mullets go, it's not a bad one?" Joel offered diplomatically, but Sofia stared him down.



"Richard Dean Anderson," she said with conviction, "is the only person who is allowed to have hair like that."

"And even that's pushing it," Josie added, and Travis snickered.

Jeff whistled. "Remind me to ask you three before I do anything to my hair."

Sofia smiled. "Will do. Pass me a napkin?"

"Sure," he passed over a stack.

"Thanks. Oh and Jeff?" Sofia continued casually.

"What's up?"

Katherine rolled her eyes and Josie was already grinning.

"Ask us three before you do anything with your hair," they chanted together.

Travis groaned. "That's never not been overdone."

"Double-negative!" Josie looked hopefully at Katherine, then pulled out her now-wrinkled essay to scan the column for the edit.

Katherine smiled sympathetically. "It is, Jo, but he meant it that way."

"Oh." Josie looked slightly defeated, then she shrugged, holding up the essay for the group to see. "Isn't it pretty? It's my latest piece from my 'Thank God for Math and Sciences: The Subjects Which Will Get Josie Rivers Into College' collection."

"It's 'that', not 'which', actually," said Sofia.

"Irony is a beautiful thing," said Travis.

"Couldn't you at least use a different color pen, Katherine?" said Joel.

"You're getting better at this, though, really. Look some of these are compliments," said Jeff.

And Katherine said nothing.

Billy Hargrove sauntered into the cafeteria.

*Sauntered, what a gross word. It fits him.*

Billy was making his way over to the table where his teammates were sitting, but paused just short of it. Few others in the cafeteria were watching, but Katherine's eyes slipped to the table just in front of Billy, where a couple of underclassmen were sitting.

*Oh no.*

"Sofia, who's that kid?" Katherine muttered to not draw the attention of the rest of the group, and Sofia tilted her head like she was cracking her neck, to quickly scan behind her.

"That's Trevor Moore's kid brother," she said quietly, "Anthony? Andrew? Anyways, he's a freshman; I think he plays tennis."

He also happened to be black.

*20 bucks says Billy only knows one of those things about him.*

Billy leaned over the table, turning towards the girls, who looked at each other nervously, before back at him.

"Hey, Billy," said one of them. "Um, how're you?"

"This guy bothering you ladies?" He leaned closer to them, resting his weight on his hands, and jerking his chin back to Trevor's brother.

"No, not at all."

"You sure about that?" Billy shifted a bit, practically next to the girls as he regarded the boy across the table.

"We're sure," said one of the girls emphatically.

"We really are," said the other.

"I don't know," he smiled slowly. "He's kind of bothering me."

"Did they stutter, Hargrove?" Trevor's brother's voice was calm, but Katherine could practically see the annoyance rippling off of him.

"Ooooo." Billy smiled again, baring his teeth. "Do we have a problem, here, Aaron?"

"Aaron, that's right," Sofia snapped her fingers, "I knew it started with an 'A'."

"I don't, but maybe you should keep on walking," Aaron said steadily.

Students were shuffling around the three of them, practically climbing over the tables across the aisle to stay away from Billy's clenched smile and Aaron's glaring eyes. To be fair, since Steve had come to school with a baseball cap pulled over his face, people tended to give Billy a pretty wide berth. Either that or, you know, copy his hair.

Billy leaned closer; the table tilted and one of the girls reached out for her Dr Pepper as it started to slide off.

"Listen," Billy's voice wasn't raised but it carried all the same, "If you think it's okay for you to—"

He didn't finish because at that moment, someone hadn't crossed on the other side of the aisle. They'd come up right behind Billy, and kicked the ankle that was holding him up; not hard enough to break anything, not hard enough to hurt, but hard enough to throw off his balance. His weight pitched forward, and Billy's neck forehead slammed into the table. The cafeteria gasped collectively, one of the girls whimpered, and Steve Harrington stopped in the middle of the aisle, shifting backwards unrepentantly.

*Now, Steve? You have to pick now to start standing up for underclassmen?*

Apparently he did.

"God, Hargrove," Steve nonchalantly stuck his hands in his coat pocket and shook his head at the table, "you really shouldn't stand in the aisle like that; someone might trip."

No one moved.

Billy planted his left hand on the table, propped himself up, and brought his right hand up to his face. It came back bloody.

When Billy pushed himself to his feet, Aaron stood too, kicking back his chair, and then it was the three of them: Billy fuming, Aaron glaring and Steve looking like nothing abnormal was going on.

"This is it, this is how they kill each other," Josie whispered.

The guys seemed like they could keep this western stare down going for a while, and Katherine tried to think of something she could do. Something anyone could do. Sure the fire alarm seemed drastic but—

"You owe me big time for this."

She looked in surprise at Sofia, who was standing up. She grabbed one of the napkins Jeff has passed her earlier, and slipped out of the table.

Katherine watched in mounting disbelief as, instead of beelining for the table in the middle of the cafeteria, Sofia turned right, to a table of suede skirts and bright eyeliner. Everyone's eyes were still on the Hargove v. Harrington match in the middle of the room, and Sofia grabbed the arm closest to her, yanking Shannon to her feet, and kept walking.

"No no no, you don't touch me," Shannon planted her feet and tried to pull her arm back.

Sofia spun on her, hair flaring, and her grip tightened. Though she meant to keep her voice down, Katherine still heard her.

"I don't know what you see in that ashtray," she hissed, "but if you want a date with it next Saturday, keep walking."

Shannon's mouth opened and shut, but when Sofia moved again, she followed.

They reached the aisle just as Billy was pulling back to throw a punch. Steve dropped his hips and lifted his own arms to get ready

for it, Aaron set his jaw as he got ready to jump in too. But before Katherine could yell at her to come back, Sofia leap at Billy.

"BILLYohmygodyoureBLEEDING!" she cried, shoving the napkins at his face.

Billy had been facing Steve and Aaron, so his head whipped towards her in confusion. His eyes widened when he saw the napkins coming for his head and he ducked.

*She's a genius. An actual genius.*

Sofia wasn't done.

"Are you okay? Oh my gosh, girls, move!" she shrieked to the girls still at the table, and they hurriedly complied. Sofia jerked her head and Shannon sat obediently. "Oh my gosh your NOSE is it BROKEN? There's blood EVERYWHERE! BILLY?"

Katherine saw it slowly dawn on everyone. The girls, slipping out the other side of the table, Aaron, lifting a hand to his mouth as he tried not to laugh at the fact that Billy was being manipulated by someone half his size.

Billy was still looking at Sofia like she was crazy, and she was still in hysterics about the amount of blood coming out of his face – it really was barely a slow drip - and so when she stepped towards him again, he stumbled back quickly...over the connecting bars of one of the stools...toppled backwards...his head fell in Shannon's lap.

"Shannon is he okay?" Sofia cried, shoving the napkin into the girl's hand.

Shannon finally caught on.

Her fingers curled into Billy's hair. "Poor baby," she cooed, "Is your head comfortable here? Are you going to be alright?"

Billy still looked confused. But he looked like he was confused and going to keep his head in Shannon's lap, which Sofia would clearly take.

The cafeteria was still mostly silent, but a couple people started whispering.

Sofia turned dramatically and gave a mock bow. "Oh come on," she called, "Like any of you wanted to sit through another assembly."

"She's my hero," Josie breathed, and Katherine knew she was only half kidding.

"Same."

The cafeteria was swelling with noise again, but before Sofia headed back to their table, Katherine saw her touch Steve's arm and say something quietly to him.

He frowned, looked like he wanted to say something, and Sofia tilted her head. Wisely, Steve stepped down. He ran a hand through his hair, still listening to Sofia, then headed back to his table as Sofia headed back to theirs.

Nobody said anything, but Travis passed Sofia a jar of nutella, which she accepted, and then a long minute passed.

"So," Josie reached out for the nutella jar, "Are you going to tell us what that was about?"

Sofia took a last spoonful and handed it over. "I wasn't kidding; who needs another assembly? We're almost to winter break."

"Hmm." Josie wasn't convinced, but she let it go.

Travis looked suspiciously between Sofia and Katherine, but he let it go too.

Sofia pulled Jeff and Joel into a conversation about the next home game, and Travis interrupted to correct Jeff's pronunciation of 'sherbet'.

Katherine took a spoonful of Nutella and tried to ignore the fact that she could feel Steve staring at her back. She'd been worried about how her friends would feel about Steve coming back into her life, but something told her they were steps ahead of her.

### 3. Chapter 3

When the final bell rang, Katherine was surprised that Sofia hadn't sought her out yet.

Of course she needn't have worried, because the brunette was perched on the hood of her car, legs curled under her, watching her breath puff out on the winter air.

"Comfortable?" Katherine called across the parking lot.

"Freezing," Sofia returned, "Can you unlock this thing so we can run the heater?"

"You know there's this big building, just over here," Katherine pointed a thumb over her shoulder to the school, "with this marvelous thing called central heating."

"Yeah, yeah, but where's the fun in that?" Sofia slid off the hood of the car and waited for Katherine to let herself in, and reach over to open the passenger door.

She always kept a enormous knit blanket in the backseat for moments like this — when the car was cold and the radiator wasn't quite doing its job yet— and she pulled it up to the front seat to cover both of their laps.

"So," Sofia accepted the blanket and spread it over her lap, "Want to tell me what that was about?"

Katherine turned in surprise. "I was going to ask you the same thing."

"Me? What did I do?"

"Broke up a fight, made Shannon's day...week, probably. And said that I owed you."

"Month, at least." Sofia rubbed her hands together and waved them in front of the heating vents. "And you do. You looked like you were about to have a panic attack, honey, I had to do something."

Katherine's jaw dropped. "What? No I didn't—"

"You did. And that's okay, because I'm not a fan of West Coast either, and Trevor's brother seems like a cool kid, but—and please hear this in the least judgmental way possible—why do you care about Steve Harrington?"

Katherine's mouth swung shut.

"And don't," Sofia started again, "say that you don't care, because let's remember who's the better liar of the two of us."

"It's definitely you."

"Of course it's me. So, what's going on?"

Katherine hesitated.

She and Steve actually hadn't said a thing to each other since the night at the diner. They weren't back to friendship, they weren't even back to casual acquaintances. And true, it'd been awhile since they'd talked, and forever since she'd have called him a friend. But the more she thought about it, the clearer it became that it might've been even longer for Steve.

She had Josie and Travis, Joel and Jeff, obviously Sofia. Who did he have?

Who was going to back him up —not Tommy or Carol or any of his other groupies from when he was on the top. Not his teammates, who wouldn't be ready to pick sides between their hometown hero and the angst fest from California. Not even Nancy, the closest thing he'd had in awhile.

So yes, Sofia was right: when Steve stood up to Billy, Katherine had panicked. Because she realized he was just as alone as he'd been on Saturday.

Katherine smoothed the blanket out on her lap. "It's kind of complicated."

"Complicated like you don't know, or you don't want to tell me?"



"What wouldn't I want to tell you?"

"I don't know, *Kat*," Sofia emphasized the nickname.

"Nobody calls me that."

"Not anymore. Someone used too, right?"

Katherine turned in her seat to rest her back against the door, staring at her friend. "Are you kidding me? That's why you thought I wanted to help him?"

"Maybe.."

"That was years ago, Sofia."

"Yeah but, I don't know, people tend to hang onto stuff like that."

Katherine shook her head. "Not for this long."

Sofia turned too, their backs against the cold glass and shoes on the car seats. "Okay, I'm only asking once: you're over him, right?"

"I can't believe you're asking me this right now."

"I can't believe you're not answering immediately, and with a resounding no."

"A resounding no," Katherine snapped. "I'm definitely not still hung up on him."

Sofia held her gaze then drew in a slow breath, looking down at her lap. "You were working on Halloween, weren't you? That's why you couldn't go to that Halloween party with us?"

Katherine was surprised and suspicious at the sudden topic change, but she nodded.

"Okay well, I went, took the twins with me. Someone spiked the punch and people just kept downing it. Everyone was drunk, jumping around to some truly horrible music, not really my scene."

She meant the music part, not the drunk part. Sofia could hold her

own against anybody, but she didn't like loud music and she really didn't like sweaty peers.

"So how long did you stay?" Katherine wasn't sure where this was going, but she knew Sofia wasn't walking down memory lane just for fun.

"Too long, honestly. I was ready to go three minutes after I got there, but the twins had to make the rounds, say hey to the right people before we could split. Just when we were finally leaving, I realized I'd left my purse and went back to get it; on my way down the hallway, someone swung open the bathroom door so quickly it almost hit me."

"And so you bit their head off."

"Almost. Except," Sofia hesitated, "then I saw his face. It was Steve. He'd barreled out the door like he wasn't thinking of anything, like the only thing that mattered was getting away and getting out. I've never seen someone look so crushed. So he looked at me, I looked at him, and then he stormed out. I found the twins and we left too."

Katherine was silent for a moment. "Was Nancy there? Please tell me she was there."

"Not like you'd think. She was in the bathroom, plus she'd been chugging that punch... I don't know what she said to him and I don't know if she meant it, but it gutted him, Katherine."

Katherine looked out over the parking lot. The bus was pulling away, and cars were piling up behind it. "So why are you telling me all this?"

"Because when I ask why you're getting me mixed up in all of this, I'm not just asking for you. If you can look me in the eye and say you're over him, then I believe you. You're just as strong as you say you are. But Steve Harrington, sure as anything, isn't as invulnerable as he thinks he is right now."

Katherine's mind was whirring. "I don't know what you want me to say."

Sofia's face softened with sympathy. "Remember that time I walked

right toward a mouth-breathing maniac to break up a fight?"

"Vaguely."

"Just tell me, and tell me honestly, why I did it."

They were silent for a long moment, then Katherine did her best at a casual shrug. "He needs friends."

Sofia dropped her hands from the vents. "I'm sorry, it sounded like you said the most popular senior in the county needs friends."

"He does."

"Steve Harrington?"

"Yes."

"Friends?"

"Yes."

"Not buying it."

"Friends," Katherine persisted, "who won't lead him on a graffiti rampage across town, friends who don't steal their parents' alcohol every chance they get, friends who aren't just there for basketball season."

"Everyone has off days when they need their parents' alcohol," Sofia grumbled.

"Not every day."

"Yeah probably not."

There was a pause before Sofia spoke again.

"And you think those friends should be us?"

"I do. Yeah."

"Okay," Sofia tossed her hair. "So, what, we send a gilded invitation

and he comes and sits with us at the caf?"

The car was warming, so Katherine folded her corner of the blanket. "That much I don't know."

Sofia folded hers too, pulling Katherine's portion into her lap and folding that as well, before tossing it back to the backseat. "Well, you'll figure it out."

"Thanks," Katherine said half-heartedly, then looked sideways at her friend. "Actually yeah, thank you. For jumping into the thick of it at lunch today. Everyone else was nervous and watching, but you're the only one who did something about it."

Sofia smiled slowly. "You're welcome. I figure now Shannon and Steve both owe me a favor, so it's not like I'm a martyr here."

"Say nothing of me."

Sofia waved a hand. "Nah, you don't owe me. You're driving me home."

Katherine raised an eyebrow. "Subtle, Sof."

"Oh come on, you saw me miss the bus. Besides, you don't start work for another hour."

"True." Katherine was hardly complaining, and threw the car in gear to back out of the lot. They both breathed a sigh of relief when it rumbled back without too much of a complaint. Sofia reaches over to fiddle with the radio, and then they were off.

Katherine slowed to a stop in front of Sofia's house, and the car spat to a stop. Sofia grabbed her bag from the floor and pressed her door open. "Alright, I'm off. See you before first period?"

"Yeah. I think Josie's mom is having a bonfire tonight, so she said she'll bring a thermos of the leftover hot cocoa in the morning."

Sofia made an a-okay hand sign and clicked her teeth, getting out of the car, hanging her head sideways to look back through the door. "Unless you're still feeling indebted and want to give me a ride in the

morning?"

Katherine shook her head. "I shouldn't encourage this...what time will you be ready?"

"You're a gem. I can be down by a quarter after 7?"

"So 7:30."

"Oh shut up."

"Close the door; you're letting all my warm air out."

Sofia shut the door with gusto, but Katherine could hear her laughing through it.

## 4. Chapter 4

*You might not care if your face gets bashed in again, but some people do, okay? So just, be careful. For their sake.*

It was what Sofia had said before whirling out of his face and mock bowing to the rest of the cafeteria.

Steve wondered whom she'd meant.

Nancy probably cared, on some weird level. *I hope my ex is okay, now that I'm officially with the guy who's been fixated on/in love with me for a decade.*

Nah, he couldn't be bitter at either of them. They had a lot more in common than he and Nance, and shared trauma could only get you so far. And they genuinely seemed happy. So, what, was he supposed to insist he could've made her happier, and scowl every time he saw them?

No point in forcing Nance to be as unhappy without him as she'd been with him.

That part did hurt, if he was being honest. Not so much the whole 'bullshit' thing as the fact that she wasn't in it like he was, and wouldn't have told him if she weren't drunk. He'd been considering staying in Hawkins, staying on at his dad's shop. He'd even looked at houses. Not for right away, of course, but just to know what was out there. There was one place in particular, not quite out of town but with a little more space than he had in his neighborhood. Small, only a bedroom, kitchen and dining room. There was a really great oak tree out front, and it would definitely hold a tire swing...

So maybe he did scowl when he saw them together, but it was internally.

*Get a grip, Harrington.*

He'd been staring at the same page of his essay for the better part of an hour. The same essay he'd been working on for the better part of

the semester. That he'd better get fixed up, or he'd be stuck in Hawkins for the better part of the rest of his life.

*Yeah, that's the spirit.*

He pushed away from the desk and paced the room for a bit, looking restlessly back at the essay before stalking back and forth again.

Nothing sounded more empty than 50 years in Hawkins.

Because the next 50 years were probably astonishingly similar to the last 50, which, he'd be willing to bet, copied the 50 before them. Better music nowadays, depending on who you ask, and you could see the wear and tear on buildings that had sat through all of it, but not much else was different.

He swiped a basketball from under his bed, tossing it thoughtfully between his hands.

He was talking like Nancy; she really had a thing for the cyclical nature of things. Good kids are good adults, no matter how bratty they are in middle school. If you start the new year with happy thoughts, you'll end it with happy memories. A grandpa sees himself in his grandson and people were wearing cardigans again, like in the 50s.

He didn't realize he'd started dribbling the ball until he heard footsteps on the base of the stairs.

"Steven?" his mother's voice travelled up from the landing. "You know the rules about ball in the house!"

He caught the basketball on its downward arc, sitting down at the desk automatically. It wasn't like she was going to come up to check that he was working, but it was practically reflex. He carefully passed the ball from hand to hand, extending his arms to test his grip.

"Sorry, Mom," he called back.

She didn't say anything right away. "I'm going to put your dinner in the fridge okay?"

*Dinner.*

*Whoops.*

Mom had had it set out for him as soon as he got home from practice, but then he'd showered, and then he'd heard Dad come in and going downstairs again just wasn't worth it. So he'd pulled out the essay and now here he was, some three hours later.

She probably fell into the Cares If Steven's Face Gets Busted category.

At least, she'd been pretty upset after the last fight with Billy. She'd practically bought out the frozen peas section of the grocery store and sat at the kitchen table for the next week and a half, pretending to read until he got home and eagerly checking his face when he came in. She cooked beef a lot that week, and kept sneaking pumpkin seeds into his bag, insisting that he needed to eat a lot of zinc to keep the bruising at bay.

Maybe he was ungrateful, but he was relieved when he came home and the kitchen was empty, and he'd check the living room and there she'd be, taking a quiz in the pages of ELLE or drying her nails. He suspected she was relieved, too, when a month passed and no new cuts or bruises appeared. It took about that long for the first ones to fade.

He slid the essay away from him, and spun the ball up in the air, whirling it on his index finger.

*It's not like I'm going to finish this tonight anyways.*

Downstairs, the house was quiet; Steve let the ball drop from his finger and it settled on the desk. He pulled a sweatshirt over his head and grabbed his sneakers from beside his desk. It wasn't so cold out that he couldn't put them on once he was outside, and his socks would be quieter on the stairs. They mostly used the garage to get in and out of the house, so the front door opened without creaking when he pushed against it.

*Is it really sneaking out if you don't leave the property?*

He sat down on the front steps, to pull his sneakers on. Standing, he



shook his hands loosely, then jumped up and down a couple of times, just to get the blood flowing again. He bounced the basketball experimentally a few times against the paved driveway, barely needing to look up for the hoop at the end of it. The three point arc or the free throw line weren't painted on the asphalt, but he knew the distance. When he was eight he'd scratched the lines in chalk, and they'd been ingrained in his memory ever since.

He worked his way between them now, lining up shots from up and down the asphalt. Shoot, rebound, square off, repeat.

It was a familiar rhythm, one he'd fallen into countless times over the years.

Shoot, rebound, square off, repeat.

Maybe she meant that some of his teammates cared? Well, they needed him on the team; he absently wondered if that was the same thing.

Shoot, rebound, square off, repeat.

Retrospectively, he hadn't expected someone like Sofia to step in. It's not like he wanted to be Hargrove's punching bag again, especially not in front of the rest of the school, but he had to do something. Last time he hadn't done something...

Shoot, rebound, square off, repeat.

The last time he hadn't done something, someone had died.

Shoot, rebound, square off, repeat.

Sure, he'd tell Nancy it wasn't their fault until he was blue in the face. And it wasn't, not theirs.

Shoot, rebound, square off, repeat.

Shoot, rebound, square off, repeat.

He'd invited them both over, he'd brought out the beers, he'd watched her cut her hand open. He'd ignored her, he'd taken Nancy

upstairs, he'd thought she was playing hookie. He hadn't wanted to tell anyone.

It wasn't *their* fault; it was his.

The basketball ricocheted off the rim of the hoop, and he watched it fly over the short fence to the lot next door.

He stood still, surprised to find he was breathing hard. He ran a hand through his hair; it came to rest at the back of his neck. His head dipped slightly and he took the minute to slow his breathing. He dropped his hand and rolled his neck, before trotting over to the fence and vaulting himself over it.

The whine of a loose timing belt echoed around the quiet neighborhood; Steve didn't register what car it belonged to until headlights lurched into the driveway where he was retrieving the ball, squealing across the pavement towards him. The car lurched to a stop and the engine promptly died. He sheepishly picked up the ball from the middle of the pavement, straightening as the driver door squawked open, and Kat jumped out.

She crossed her arms over the top of the door, setting her chin on her wrists. "I can't decide if I should ask if you're okay or why you're in my driveway."

He held up the ball as an explanation. "Just catching my rebound."

She glanced over at his house, at the distance between the net and her driveway. "Did it grow wings?"

"Hey, even the Iceman misses a shot now and then."

"Val Kilmer plays basketball?"

"What? No, George Gervin. The center for the Spurs."

She seemed mildly disappointed at that. "Hmm. Practice was over hours ago; what're you doing out here?"

*Just contemplating the murder of my ex-girlfriend's best friend and dealing with the fact that if it's anyone's fault, it's definitely mine. You know, the*

*usual. How's your night going?*

"If I missed bad enough to get this over here," he tossed the basketball up in the air and caught it again, "then clearly I need the practice. You know, you really shouldn't be driving with the timing belt like that."

She disappeared back into the car and emerged a moment later with her backpack, which she slung over her shoulder. "I'll tighten it in the morning before school."

*Does she do it herself? Why not just take it into a garage?*

She stepped out and slammed the door, reading his expression. "I wouldn't be working at Ronnie's if we could afford to take my car to a mechanic every time it wobbled."

Steve tossed the ball between his hands, not sure what to say to that, but finally being reminded to ask, "How's your dad doing?"

Her step faltered, and she looked down, playing with the straps of the backpack she had swung over her arm.

The accident at the quarry wasn't new news, hadn't been for a couple of years. Steve had heard that the Sattler company settlement had covered the initial hospital bills for everyone involved, but he also knew that any further lawsuits for continued care were declined. Kat was part of a dozen families who'd suddenly found themselves down a breadwinner, and they'd all had to adjust.

"Doctors can't really expect his legs to magically un-crush themselves, can they?"

He couldn't believe she was as unaffected as her words. "I'm sorry."

"You and all of Hawkins." As soon as she said it, she winced. "I don't mean it like that. Everyone's sorry, and everyone means it; it kind of just becomes habit, you know, to brush it off."

*Doesn't help that I'm way overdue saying it.*

"No worries."

"Thanks for asking though. Most people don't. Hawkins is pretty good at ignoring what's actually going on, in favor of what's comfortable."

*And that's more on the nose than you will ever know.*

Aloud, he said "Small towns are good about stuff like that."

She nodded, then looked back at his house. "Are you still sticking with the 'I Just Wanted to Get Some More Practice' story?"

"Are you still buying it?"

"I wouldn't be asking if I ever had."

Steve dropped the ball, letting it bounce on its own before dribbling it absently. "More like it beat staring at the same essay for another hour."

She nodded gravely. "For Ms. Snyder's class? I was helping Josie with hers earlier. Shakespeare really messes people up because they think they have to be prolific. Really, it's just a bloodier version of a Fitzgerald novel and—"

"Not for Ms. Snyder's class," he interrupted, mostly because he didn't want to get into the virtues, or lack thereof in his opinion, of the Scottish play. "Wait, did you say you helped Josie? I thought she was like a genius."

"She is," Katherine said, with an edge of defensiveness. "But everyone messes up homonyms at some point."

"What does chilli have to do with it?"

"What?"

"Isn't..." he got the sinking suspicion he wasn't the one who was right here. "Homily, that's what you said, right? Like in all those weird summer soups?"

She blinked, then suppressed a laugh. "I said homonym, which is when words sound the same and are different."

"So, not corn?"

"Not corn."

"So are they homonyms? Homily and homonym?"

"Now those are just commonly confused words."

"Is that the official title?"

"Believe it or not, it is."

"Doesn't sound official."

"Well, take it up with Oxford," Kat shook her head, but she was still smiling. She switched her backpack to her other shoulder. "It's kinda late, Steve..."

Steve grabbed the ball when it bounced back up to him, and turned to make his exit. He stopped before the gate, looking back to see Katherine fumbling with her keys at the front door.

"Hey Kat," he called, before jogging back over to the door.

She had finally found the right key, and looked up in surprise, then tilted her head towards his house. "That one's yours."

"Yeah no kidding. It's just," he took a breath, "If you can find something wrong with Josie's essay, you can definitely fix a thing or three with mine."

She looked down at the door. She turned the key, the lock clicked, the door opened, and she looked back up at him. "I have a busy day tomorrow, but you can bring it by my shift. I'll get it back to you by lunch on Wednesday."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously. Now get off my driveway already."

She slipped inside and Steve hopped back over the fence, leaving the ball by the hoop and letting himself in. He wasn't sure if Sofia had

meant to tell him or not, but he got the feeling that Kat was one of the 'some people' she'd been talking about.

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**A/N: Hello friends! Thank you to everyone who has read and reviewed so far! Please do leave suggestions on where you'd like this to go, how you're liking it, and what you'd like to see from me! I wasn't planning on writing this chapter from Steve's perspective, but I kept seeing gifsets of Steve seeing Nancy after dropping Dustin off, and I just had to dig into the angst a little bit. More of that to come (this is me, after all), but hopefully some more light-hearted stuff too! I'm thinking some of The Party members will make an appearance, probably definitely some more Sofia, maybe even some Nancy! Drop me a note :)**

## 5. Chapter 5

**A/N: Just a PSA, I changed the rating because of mature language; it just wasn't right to write these characters without it! It's not how I usually write, but I think it turned out alright. Please please review!**

---

Steve just didn't go into the cafeteria the next day.

He had to finish rewriting the essay anyways, so it wasn't like he was brooding in a bathroom stall by himself or anything.

Just, you know, the corner of the library.

He swung his backpack off his shoulder onto the table, and pulled a folder out, laying the crinkled paper next to the fresh copy he was copying for Kat. He'd made three sentences' progress when another backpack landed on the table.

"So I heard you almost got your ass beat by Billy again." Dustin plopped into the chair across from him, pushing it back.

"How are you here right now?" Steve lifted his hands in question and his eyes narrowed as Dustin shifted. "Don't even think about putting your feet on this table."

Dustin put his feet on the table. "I have my ways."

Steve looked around the library.

*Is no one else noticing the middle schooler here, right now? Just me?*

"Look, kid, I have to finish with this and you really need to get back to campus before—"

"It's lunch at a middle school, who's gonna miss me?"

*Fair point.*

"That's not the point. The point is—"

"That Billy almost curb stomped you again? Because that's what I was told."

Steve shook his head, amazed. "By who, who is even telling you this?"

"I know things, Steven."

*Of course you do.*

He rubbed the back of his neck. "Okay, yeah, shit went down in the caf; what do you want?"

Dustin's eyes widened and he shook his head in a silent 'and?' that Steve didn't want to deal with, so he just mimicked the motion back.

Dustin rolled his eyes. "Oh, oh that's all you're gonna say, is—"

"Yeah that's all I'm gonna say."

"So I broke out of school and came all the way over here and—"

"I already said that I'm not cool with you doing that."

"And all you say is some nebulous 'shit happened' bull and—"

"You know, kid, you should really start watching your language—"

"And all I want is an explanation—"

"You're just way too young and it's kinda—"

"Boys!"

A librarian appeared out of nowhere and both of their heads whipped towards her.

"Oh I'm sorry, ma'am, were we being too animated?"

Steve's gaze swiveled back to Dustin, who was earnestly looking at the librarian, the picture of contrition.

"More than a little," she said sternly.



Dustin nodded solemnly. "It's just what happens when we talk about Great Inquisition."

The woman didn't blink.

"Kinesiology?" Dustin tried next.

She crossed her arms.

"American sign language!" he said triumphantly.

"You two are discussing all of that?" She looked at Steve, but he was deliberately avoiding eye contact, taking a vested interest the Dewey Decimal codes on the books over her shoulder.

"But of course!" Dustin said magnanimously, "No subject stone is left unturned in our tutoring sessions."

"Mr. Harrington." The librarian lifted an eyebrow. "Mr. Harrington is your tutor?"

*Should I be offended by that?*

"Yes, ma'am!" Dustin was unaffected, "We're just about to get into the intricacies of the paleontol—"

She held up a hand. "I take it back; I don't care. Just keep your voices down, okay?"

"Thank you for the reminder," Dustin sang.

She strode away quickly, shaking her head and muttering something about her paygrade.

Steve waited till she was out of their peripherals to turn back to the table. "Dude, what was that?"

"Uh, you're welcome." Dustin put his feet back up on the table. "So what happened?"

Steve sighed. "Nothing happened. That's kind of why this," he pointed at his face, "still looks like it does."

"And while this," Dustin motioned towards Steve's face like he was washing a window on a sedan, "is looking great—and I'm happy about that, I really am, we all are—I heard something-very-not-like-nothing happened."

"Right, because *you know things*," Steve said skeptically.

"Yep."

"Okay so if you know so much what do you want from me?"

"Who's the girl?"

*Um.*

Of course, there was only one way to ask a clarifying question, and there wasn't any way to ask *that* without sounding like a complete asshole. Steve sighed. "Which girl?"

"God, what must it be like?" Dustin asked in wonderment, then shook his head. "Whatever. Okay so I heard that you tried to pick a fight because you have a death wish—"

"I do not have a death wish!"

"Uh-huh, sure. In spite of said death wish, this fight got stopped because some girl threw a popular chick at Billy."

"That..." Steve pinched the bridge of his nose. "That's not exactly that happened."

"Okay, so who was the girl who stopped it?"

"Her name's Sofia."

"And who is she?"

"Just a girl; what do you want?"

"What, so random girls are just jumping in front of Billy Hargrove to save your ass?"

"I mean, Shannon got a date out of it, so I don't think anyone's

complaining."

"Who's Shannon?"

"Another girl."

"Well did you know her?"

"I know lots of people, Henderson."

"Again, what must it be like...So is she why the Sofia girl jumped in?"

"No, Sofia jumped in because she's Kat's friend."

"Who the hell is Kat?"

*Great question, kid.*

"My neighbor. We go way back."

"Way back like...?"

"Way back like we were kids together, come on."

"Oh," Dustin seemed to think that over. "Okay. So what part of that was wrong?"

*Not much, but on principal...*

"I don't have a death wish."

Dustin put his hands flat on the table and spoke very, very slowly. "You attacked a hell demon from another dimension with a baseball bat."

"Yeah, well, you attacked one with a hockey stick."

"It was a baby and that was a demodog, not the full-grown thing; please keep up, Steven."

"That doesn't make it okay!"

"Right, so who's Kat?"

"She's the person who's going to edit this essay; I have to run it by Ronnie's after practice, which is why I was trying to copy it over now..." he ended pointedly.

Dustin leaned over the table to peer at the upside down papers, and let out a long breath. "You really do need to copy that over; that first page is a mess."

"Yeah no kidding."

Dustin was quiet for a beat. "So you have a date at Ronnie's with a girl who stopped Billy from beating you again?"

Steve dropped the pencil, leaning back in his seat. "Where are you getting this shit?"

"Uh, you literally just said you're meeting her at Ronnie's."

"Yeah because she works there."

"Mmhmm."

"Seriously, kid."

"Mmhmm."

Steve shook his head and looked back down at the papers. He flipped the folder shut, and slid it back into his backpack. "Did you bring a lunch?"

"Oh no, you are not getting off that easy."

"I think I am; did you bring one?"

Dustin scowled, but opened his backpack to pull out a crinkled brown bag. Steve pulled his backpack off the table, and pushed Dustin's toward him. "Come on, then, you'd better eat before class starts back up again."

"But—"

"Nope, we're walking away now." He grabbed their lunches and

stood, trying not to look surprised when Dustin mimicked him.

*Didn't think that would work.*

He handed the kid his lunch, and they walked out of the library. It wasn't a long walk back to the middle school, but neither of them were really supposed to be on the other's campus so they walked slowly, unwrapping their lunches as they went.

"So, what's going on with you? You don't actually need a tutor, right?" Steve pulled his sandwich out of the paper sack, tucking the rest of the bag under his arm.

Dustin snorted. "No offense, my man, but you wouldn't be a good tutor."

"Yeah no shit, but checking seemed like the thing I was supposed to do."

"I don't need a tutor," Dustin said dismissively, struggling with how to open a cup of chocolate pudding whilst holding the rest of his lunch and not dropping the spoon.

Steve reached out for the lunch bag, which Dustin handed over. "K good."

Dustin squinted up at him. "Do you? Is that why Kat has to edit your essay?"

"Kat has to edit my essay so I can get into college."

Dustin finished the pudding cup and reached for his lunch bag; Steve was trying not to think about how quickly he'd inhaled the chocolate goop when he pulled a second cup from his bag.

"Is she really good at grammar and stuff?" Dustin handed the bag back to Steve, who took it automatically, and lifted a shoulder.

"According to a couple of people."

"Hmm."

They fell silent, working on their respective lunches and continuing their stroll.

"So," the words came out kind of garbled, and Dustin cleared his throat, "why is she suddenly so interested in helping you?"

"Hell if I know," Steve said honestly.

Dustin seemed to consider that for a minute, then went back to his pudding. Steve frowned, stuffing the rest of his sandwich into his mouth so he'd have a free hand to open and sort through Dustin's bag. "You've gotta have like broccoli or something in here, right?"

"There's an ABJ, I think." They passed a trashcan and Dustin dropped both plastic cups in it, reaching for his bag again.

"A what?"

"ABJ."

Steve shrugged and Dustin rolled his eyes. "Almond Butter and Jelly."

Steve relinquished the bag. "Sounds healthy?"

"Tastes like chalk though."

*Can't argue with that.*

They were at the end of the parking lot, which meant the Middle School was just in front of them, and Steve stopped. "Alright I'm going to watch you go in, okay? You can't just slip off campus whenever you hear things or...I don't know..."

"When the rumor mill starts to turn?" Dustin supplied.

"Yeah, sure."

"Right. Well, in this case, the rumor mill was, like, rocking off its supports and spewing water like nobody's business. You've gotta tell me this stuff, buddy."

"Alright, alright point taken; go on."

Dustin pushed the bill of his hat up half an inch with his index finger in a kind of salute, then walked up to the school. Steve waited for the door to close behind him before turning to head back to his own campus. As he passed through the doors, the bell rang to announce the end of lunch, and he thought about the essay in his backpack. On the one hand, he really needed to copy it over so Kat could look at it in its best light. On the other, she was looking at it because that light was pretty damn awful, so there wasn't much use in transcribing it. He thought about the blue and red hat, disappearing into the middle school building, and decided that if he'd sent Dustin back to class, he'd better follow his own advice.

## 6. Chapter 6

It was a slow shift at Ronnie's, where everything happened in parallel. Katherine would seat three or four tables in quick succession, take their drink orders, then food orders, and serve them all at once. It was like having one big table, only this way she could count on tips.

In the lull while everyone was eating, Katherine bussed the tables from her last four-family rush, tidying her way around the diner.

"Counter, Miss Tracy," Frank called, and she turned, surprised.

A red billed baseball cap had appeared at one of the stools at the counter, and the boy wearing it was arranging an armful of books over the counter. Dark curls tangled under the cap, and he settled into the stool with satisfaction, looking over the spread of no less than seven books.

Katherine pulled a ketchup out of her apron for Table Fifteen, glanced over her other tables, then moved behind the counter, reading the titles of the books upside down.

Reptiles of South America, Eastern Reptiles/Amphibians, The Reptiles and Amphibians of the Indian Subcontinent...yikes.

"That is either," she grabbed a square napkin from by the soda fountain and slid it onto the counter in front of the boy, "the most oddly specific research project or the most shortsighted vacation."

He looked at the napkin, up at her, and folded his hands contentedly on top of the books. "Light reading, for the enrichment and edification of my young mind."

*Oh, is that not what I said?*

"Okay, Atticus," she pulled out a pencil, tapping the counter with the end of it. "Counter space is a hot commodity; are you ordering?"

The kid looked pointedly down the length of the counter, empty except for his stool.



"Yeah, I know," she shrugged, "but it's my job to say that. And who knows, it might actually get busy. Do you want a Coke, seltzer, Tab...?"

"Something orange?"

"Fanta? Or, I guess an Orange Julius, technically."

"Not a milkshake."

"Fanta it is, then." Katherine spun away from the counter to tap it into the register.

Her tables were all doing fine, and she grabbed his soda from the fountain at the end of the counter. She dropped a straw next to the napkin and set the orange soda on top of it.

"Merci," he said, in the most exaggerated French accent she'd heard outside of an Intro to French class.

The kid was drumming his hands on the counter. Not loud enough to distract her tables, but definitely loud enough to give away the fact that, even though his eyes were determinedly fixed on the page, he wasn't reading.

"Did you know," he said after a moment, "that frogs breathe by opening and closing their throat to pump air into their lungs?"

She leaned a hip against the counter, somewhat amused. "I confess, I did not know that."

"Mmhmm. And the biggest frog in the world is in West Africa. That son of a bitch is a foot long."

"Is it really?"

"What, a foot long?"

"No," she tapped his book with her pencil, "Is it the son of a female dog characterized by its protective bearing towards those who would threaten its litter?"

The kid hesitated, started to answer, and then frowned. "What?"

"A bitch. A literal son of a bitch. I thought you said it was a frog?"

"I—I did. I just meant, you know, like—"

"You meant it in the antiquated, gender-normative sense of being a pejorative noun applied to any woman who isn't meeting the current male-imposed standards of behavior."

"Whoa."

Katherine held her serious face before grinning and tucking her pencil behind her ear. "Just kidding," she said. "Well, kind of. Don't say that, though; there are impressionable minds here."

"I'm an impressionable mind," the kid grumbled.

"Yeah, I'm getting that impression. What's the frog called?"

"Contrua goliath," the kid said meekly.

"That's not very original."

"I guess at a foot long they don't have to be."

"Touché," she thought about it and shuddered. "Nothing sounds worse than a foot long amphibian."

The kid opened his mouth and then shut it with a snap. "Yep," he flipped a page emphatically, "that would be pretty disgusting."

*Weird.*

She drummed her fingers on the counter. "Seriously, what are you reading all these for? Aren't you too close to Christmas break for a science project?"

"I already told you, Tracy, it's just for edification. Are you the only one working tonight?"

"First of all: Gee, thanks. Second: Tracy is my la—"

"That's not what I meant," he said, interrupting her. "You're very nice, and anyone would be happy to have you as a waitress. Nobody I'd rather ask for orange soda. But I'm waiting for someone who's supposed to work tonight."

*So. Weird.*

She pulled a towel from her apron and swiped it over the counter. "Sorry, it's just me tonight."

He frowned. "Are you sure?"

"Pretty darn."

He watched her for a second, then suddenly started stacking his books again. "Asshole said he was meeting her here..."

Kat had been sweeping the crumbs off the counter into her hand, but she stopped and raised an eyebrow.

"What," said the kid, "Is that not the correct usage either?"

"I mean, I don't think science has yet recorded any instances of a sentient—"

"Have you met Billy Hargrove?"

Kat hesitated. "Okay, fair point. But keep it up, and we're gonna get a jar. Just for you. Write 'language' on it. A dollar every time you swear."

The kid looked like she'd just canceled Christmas. "I don't have that kind of money!"

"So say all of us. Seriously. Watch the language; this is a classy joint here."

The kid glanced around at the too-cutesy vintage diner shtick that Ronnie's pushed so hard.

"Yeah, yeah," Kat said, and then before the kid could make some clever comment, she added, "Remember the jar."

The bell above the door dinged, and Katherine was surprised when Danny walked in. "I didn't know we had bussers scheduled for tonight," she called to him.

He waved his hand in the air, brushing past her to the register. "Don't get too excited, I just need to pick up my check. Corner booth needs refills though."

Katherine looked past him and scowled; he was right. She went back to the drink machine, filling the plastic cups with cokes and a seltzer.

"How's your Fanta doing?" she asked over her shoulder to the cap at the counter.

"It's good," the kid responded, then focused on Danny, who was rooting through a manila envelope of checks under the register. "Please, please tell me that is not where your checks are stored."

"This," Danny selected his paystub, clenched it between his teeth and wedged the manila envelope back under the register, "is not where the checks are stored."

Katherine was on her way to the table, juggling the drinks, but well within eavesdropping range, and she heard the kid's sigh loud and clear.

"So many problems, so—Nope, no, staying on mission. You're the busser?"

Danny pulled the check out of his mouth, studying it. "One of 'em, yeah. Why?"

The kid leaned over the counter and lowered his voice. "Is there a cat who works here?"

Danny looked up from his check. "Does this look like Chuck E Cheese?"

"What?"

"What?"

"Son of a bitch, not a physical cat, you..." the kid was mumbling, more to himself than to Danny, and he took a deep breath before trying again. "Okay first of all, it's a rat. At Chuck E Cheese. Or a mouse, or a chinchilla, okay, but I was asking about a person, a human. Is there a person named Kat who works here?"

Danny looked sheepish, then remembered he was talking to a middle schooler and drew himself up. "Next time, lead with that. And we don't, but the closest we've got is..."

Katherine was asking Table Nine if they wanted refills as well—they didn't—but she could practically feel the kid and Danny both turning to face her. She grabbed an empty onion ring stand off the table, and headed back to the counter. She shook her head at Danny like don't worry about it; you can go, and he shrugged it off and left the diner. The kid was still staring at her.

"Why'd your cook call you Tracy if you're Kat?" he asked before she was behind the counter.

"It's my surname, so it's more my name than Kat is. And close to nobody shortens my actual name, so," she dropped the onion ring stand in the dish bin behind the counter, then turned and faced the kid, "that means the 'asshole' is Steve."

"Remember the jar."

She did, just about the time she realized there was really only one reason for this middle schooler to know Steve Harrington.

*Of course.*

"You're one of Will Byers' friends, aren't you?"

"We do have names, you know."

"You must."

"I mean, we don't just come as a singular entity of—"

"Okay, so what's yours?"

He paused for a beat, before giving a grudging, "Dustin."

She wiped her hand on her apron, then help it over the counter. "Hey, Dustin. Katherine. So, what's going on here?"

He took her hand, shook it, then rested his head in his hands on the top of his stack of books. "Why are you helping Steve?"

She thought for a minute. "You mean with the essay? Because he asked me to."

"Yeah, but why you?"

"Gosh, Dustin, you sure know how to make a girl feel special."

"Again, you're very nice, and—"

"I know, I know, and a gift to restaurant-goers everywhere. I also happen to be pretty good at English, writing, grammar, all that. Which I think matters a little more in the Steve-essay-editing department."

He considered her for a moment, then nodded. "Okay."

"Okay?"

"Okay."

She smiled. "So, what do I win for passing?"

"Please, you didn't pass anything. Especially not checks to your tables..."

"Was...was that a joke?"

"It was."

"Wasn't very funny."

"No, but it was English-y."

"It almost was, at least."

"You like English."

"That's because I'm good at it."

"I'm not, but I committed."

"You did, and I can respect that."

"Thank you; that's all I ask."

Katherine laughed, and went over to the register to pull up the tabs for her tables. She ran the checks out the tables; one pass to drop them off, and a second to pick up the cash. A third to start bussing when the bell rang again and Steve himself walked into the diner. She waved at him, and pointed him towards the bar, while she piled coffee cups and fry baskets onto a serving tray.

Steve settled onto a stool at the end, nodded at the other customer at the bar and did a very dramatic double take.

"Good evening, Steven!" Dustin crowed.

"Henderson? What the hell are you—"

"Before you finish that thought, you should know that Kat is going to get a Language jar."

Steve shook his head. "A what?"

"That's what I said, but this is a classy joint they have here."

Katherine hefted her brimming tray onto the counter, sorting silverware from plates into the bin. "That's copyrighted, Dustin. How was practice?"

Steve looked like his head was spinning. "You two know each other."

"Indeed," said Dustin.

"We bonded over the..." Katherine tilted her head and pointed a fork at Dustin, "What was it called?"

"Contrua goliath," Dustin supplied.

"Thank you. The world's largest frog," she finished.

"Frog, in fact, not dog," Dustin added.

Katherine dumped the silver into a soap bucket and pulled the tray off the counter, heading back to the tables. "Nice."

Steve stared between the two of them, having to turn around on the stool to make the action possible. Katherine could see the exact moment when he decided to move past it, running a hand through his hair, and leaning back on the counter. "It was fine, practice was fine."

"That's good. Do you have that essay for me?"

"I do, but it's a mess."

"I thought you were copying it over." Dustin interjected, and Steve glared at him.

"That was the plan, but then my lunch was hijacked."

"I'm not even going to ask." She piled another tray with dishes, then supported it on her hip so she could fill the other hand with glasses. As she made her way around the counter, she heard the bell ding again, and Steve turned to check, then swung back.

"Did you send out invitations?" he muttered.

She glanced up from behind the counter to see Josie, Joel and Jeff making their way across the diner. The twins were talking a mile a minute—or would that be two miles a minute? Miles squared per minute?—and Josie was looking contentedly between the two of them.

"Hey, Katherine," she sang as they settled into the other stools at the counter. "The library was closing and the guys were just finishing with practice, so we thought we'd stop and say hey."

"Hey," she supplied pleasantly.

"Are those the Ryan brothers?" Dustin whispered.



At least, he meant to whisper, but the twins heard him, realized that they weren't the only ones at the counter, and swiveled in their chairs to regard him, and Steve beyond him.

"In the flesh," Jeff said.

"Two and the same," Joel said.

"King Steve," Josie said.

"Miss Rivers," Steve said.

"Bard," Dustin said, and everyone turned to him. He shrugged.  
"Dustin works too. Just felt like I should announce it."

"Bard like Shakespeare?" Josie asked, looking uncertainly at Katherine, while Steve put a reassuring (or restraining, depending on your perspective) hand in front of Dustin.

The game wasn't really on Katherine's radar, but she knew it existed, and that she didn't want this conversation tanking down that rabbit hole.

"So your turn," Katherine said quickly, to the twins, "How was your practice?"

"Very practice-like," Jeff provided.

"Coach went easy on us, since we have that game on Thursday."

Crisis averted, Katherine went back out into the diner, wiping off the tables she'd just bussed. As she headed back to the counter, the twins were still going on about their practice, Dustin was mirroring Josie's tennis-match-spectator behavior, and Steve was...very interestedly playing with a loose thread on the sleeve of his jacket. She rerouted, going around the customer side, to the end where Steve was.

"Use your words, Harrington," she mumbled out of the side of her mouth, wiping off the counter, "They're not that intimidating and they're certainly not telepathic."

"I'm not intimidated," he insisted stubbornly.

"Then stop de-threading your jacket."

The bell over the door chimed, and Katherine pulled menus over the counter to go seat her next table. Family of three, two coffees and a hot chocolate; yes, they would like a minute to look over the menu. She pushed back into the kitchen to grab the kid's cocoa, thinking about it for a second, then pulling a couple extra mugs off the shelf. Dustin looked affronted when Katherine set the mugs in front of Josie, the twins, and slid one down to Steve, but she pointed to his soda. Steve stuck a coffee straw through the whipped cream in his mug, and pushed it in front of Dustin.

The counter was contentedly quiet for a moment, and Katherine cleared her throat. "What was that, Steve?" she asked, looking pointedly at him.

Dustin choked on the straw, Josie and the twins looked like they could swear no one had said anything and Steve looked like he knew exactly what she was doing. He held her gaze for a second, then tilted his head and laughed a bit. "Uh, I was just saying rivalry games, always more fun. So Thursday should be a great crowd."

Joel grinned broadly. "My man! That's what I always say."

"I mean, yeah," Steve shrugged, "Better angry than asleep, right?"

"Dude, yes!" Joel hit his brother in the chest, "That's what I was trying to tell you."

Jeff rolled his eyes and made a case for calm but pleasant bleachers, and then the three of them were off. Katherine looked at Josie and the two of them suppressed smiles.

*That's what it takes to make friends? Seriously?*

But Katherine wasn't about to fight it, and she eventually pushed away from the counter to grab a coffee pitcher to refresh her table, just as another couple came in. They, of course, wanted an explanation of every breakfast combo on the menu. By the time she'd taken their order, Frank had her first table's order in the window, and just as she'd dropped that off, the chimed.

There was no family waited to be seated.

But Steve's stool was empty.

**A/N: Sorry about the weird formatting with the uploads; I don't know how that keeps happening guys! Anyways, I figured out how I'm going to wrap up the story, and I'm excited to write it! Let me know what you're excited to read.**

## 7. Chapter 7

Katherine was at a loss for what drove Steve out of the diner. The twins didn't know what they'd said and Dustin wouldn't tell her what they'd said, beyond a cryptic "Joel brought up the Hollands selling their...never mind, actually". The only Hollands she knew were Barb's parents, and 'knew' was probably not the right word, so that was a dead end. At any rate, when her car sputtered into her driveway later that night, the Harrington house was still, and even though she waited until 15 minutes before school started the following morning, the maroon BMW stayed in the driveway. From the second-floor window of her first period class, Katherine saw it creep into the school lot, and Steve made it inside just as the tardy bell rang. She couldn't find him during lunch either. It wasn't like she accidentally crossed paths with Steve all the time, but when Monday came around and she hadn't passed him in their driveways or a hallway once, she was more than a little suspicious. And so, after school, Katherine found herself sitting on the bleachers by the ball bin in the gym, telling herself she wasn't overreacting.

Doing her level best to avoid eye contact, she read the embroidered text on all the championship banners hung around the gym. As the players came out onto the court, she listened to the squeak of their shoes against the maple floor; she recognized the short scuff when they realized someone not-in-uniform was sitting next to their stash of basketballs. She didn't want any of their attention; she was just waiting for someone to approach the ball bag and stay by her, instead of grabbing a ball and retreating.

She'd just kind of been hoping that someone would be Steve.

The stench of cigarette smoke hit her a moment before Billy Hargrove put a leg on the bleacher bench next to her, crossed his arms on his knee, and leaned over. "Hey there, sweetheart," he said around a toothpick, clearly a stand-in for a Marlboro, "Did you come for a show?"

*Katherine Tracy, don't you dare lean back.*

She told herself not to inhale, and refused to lower her gaze from the

rafters to the senior beside her. "Not really, Billy, just meeting a friend," she said curtly.

"Shame," he said quietly, and his eyes drifted from her face downward. "Welllllll, you have me at a disadvantage; I don't know your name."

*It's like that's intentional or something.*

But she didn't feel like being confrontational—not with this particular basketball player, anyways—so she gave a very polite smile, and went back to studying the banners.

She could tell he was still watching her, and the hope that he would just walk away was rapidly diminishing. She could hear the footfall from the other players, the guys on the court either stretching or jogging back and forth. "Looks like practice is starting; you should probably get out there and join them," she said evenly, "Don't you think?"

He hadn't moved away, if anything, he'd just leaned deeper into his propped up knee. "I think," he tilted his head, studying her, "that I usually don't go for redheads. But I could be convinced—"

"Or maybe it's a sign. Old habits die hard, spilt milk, water under the bridge, etc." She was running out of clichés when Billy shifted slightly, and she realized he was actually reaching for her hair.

*Oh I do NOT think so.*

She stood quickly, turning away from the court and lifting her chin as she stared down at Billy. "Looks like practice is starting," she said again, her tone clipped, "You should probably get out there and join them."

He straightened, stepping off the bench, and Katharine told herself again to not back away. She was still taller, but only because she was standing on the bleachers, and she refused to be the first to look away. Billy looked like he was about to say something, then his eyes focused on something behind her, and his mouth snapped shut. A moment later, Katharine felt hands around her waist and she was

lifted off the bleachers.

Steve set her on the gym floor, and he bent to meet her eyes. "You good?" he asked quietly, and she couldn't read the expression on his face.

*You mean other than grossed out by Billy's existence, confused that somehow I'm in the middle of this territorial thing you two have going on, and also not thrilled that this is what it took to get you to stop avoiding me? Yeah, I'm good.*

"Just fine," she said.

He looked at her for a moment longer, nodded slightly, and turned back to the bleachers. "Get knotted, would you, Hargrove?"

Billy exhaled and leaned his head back, setting his jaw. "Hey," he smiled lazily, "just keeping your girl entertained, Harrington."

"Nobody's here for your particular brand of entertainment."

Billy laughed. "Everyone's looking for it, Stevie. Some people just don't know it yet."

Katherine pressed her lips together; thankful that Steve was between her and Billy.

They were just glaring at each other now, like some Arthurian scene, the king and the usurper.

A whistle blew, and Coach Evans walked onto the court. He looked at his team, hustling off the court for his instructions, and then over at the bleachers to the three of them.

Katherine figured he could get a pretty clear picture from their body language.

"Hargrove," Coach Evans yelled. "Sideline, let's go. Harrington, you know how I feel about students on my court; you've got two minutes."

*Coach ex machina.*

Before she could get too introspective, someone plugged the speakers into a radio and the gym shook with a heavy beat. Shoes were squeaking on the maple and the whistles shrilled above the music. Billy backed up to the courts, pulling the toothpick from between his mouth to point it at Katherine.

"Catch you later, Red," he said, before turning to jog over to the coach's line.

*I hope you trip and choke on that thing.*

But she didn't say anything aloud, and instead grabbed the sleeve of Steve's tshirt and pulled until he followed her. The end of the court was still loud, and she didn't let go of his sleeve until they were in the alleyway outside.

Steve looked up at the rain gutters, and down at the grass. "Sorry about that."

*Yeah, me too.*

"Not your fault," she shrugged.

"Did he call you Red?"

"It's for the hair," she said inanely.

"No shit."

She tilted her head, "Was the lift really necessary?"

"The what?"

Katherine mimed picking something up and setting it down. "The lift. Like, I get that you two are in the middle of a turf war, but was 'hands off' the necessary message?"

"Yeah, actually," he met her eyes, and she got the feeling he believed it.

*Doesn't mean I have to like being the rook to your kings.*

Which brought her back to the fact that she hadn't seen him in a week, and it took Billy Hargrove to call him back. She pulled her backpack off her shoulders and started going through it. "Guess what I did last Wednesday?"

Steve was watching her frenzy of motion warily. "Worked at the diner?"

"After that," she pulled out a folder, going through it, swinging the backpack over her shoulder. "After you ran out, after Josie and the twins—who, by the way, feel like they said something awful, but can't figure out what—and Dustin left, and after we closed for the night."

She pulled out his essay, and pushed it at his chest. His eyes darted down, recognizing her handwriting on the pages, the clean and fresh pages, neater and longer than the paper he'd given her last week.

Katherine pulled at her hair, from where it had tangled under the backpack. "I stayed up till 3, that's what I did. Going through this essay."

He pursed his lips. "You didn't have to rewrite it."

"I did, Steve, you didn't leave any room in the margins."

He took the papers involuntarily, and flipped through them. When he spoke, his voice was quiet. "I really appreciate that, Kat—"

"You know, I'd like to think you do, but it took Billy Hargrove poking at me for you to materialize."

Steve winced and Katharine looked down; her knuckles were white on the folder in her hands. She hadn't realized she was this upset, but clearly she was.

Steve was holding the paper uncertainly, shifting his weight between his feet. Katherine took a breath to steady herself.

"Sofia," she said slowly, "says my superpowers are grammar and worrying about my friends."



The corners of his mouth tilted up slightly, and Katherine found herself wanting to smile too. "She's not wrong. When you left the diner, the twins felt really bad, Steve. I know Josie said they 'just stopped by', but she doesn't have a spontaneous bone in her body, which means Sofia told her too. Which means they all knew how much it meant to me for you to get along. And then you left, nobody knows why, and you go MIA for almost a week? What's going on?"

Steve was paying incredible attention to the essay, and tried to shrug nonchalantly. "It's nothing."

She raised an eyebrow. "Are you serious?"

"Look, Kat, you heard Coach, I've got to get back in there—"

"Yeah, and I'd say you have ninety seconds left of the two minutes."

"I'm not doing this—"

"What, you're not going to explain anything thing?" she knew her voice was raising, and Steve was looking increasingly uncomfortable, but she pressed on. "You run out, avoid me for a week, stress my friends out—"

"Not here, okay?"

He said it louder than he'd intended and Katherine stopped short at the intensity in his voice. She looked around at the brick walls framing them, the field beyond them, the gym still thumping with the base of whatever song was playing now, the shoe squeaks and the whistle blows rising above it.

*What is it about here?*

But Steve wasn't looking at her. He was glaring at the ground, a memory of another conversation, maybe more, in this same place, was written on his face.

*Whatever it is, I can't fight it.*

"Okay," she said gently. "Okay, not here."

Steve shuffled the essay, but his face relaxed.

"I get off Ronnie's at 10," she continued, "And I'll be home fifteen minutes after that. Better?"

Steve nodded at the ground.

"Okay...okay." He wasn't responding, so she was really just affirming herself. She hesitated only a moment longer before walking away. Steve didn't say anything, and when she turned to leave the alley, he'd gone back inside.

Hours later, Katherine rolled her neck, watching the second hand click to its vertical position on the clock above the door of the diner. She'd finished all her tables at 9:34, had triple checked all the salt shakers and napkins by 9:47, and Frank had tossed her the keys at 9:59, to go out back for a smoke before he went home. On principle, she had to wait to flip the **Come On In!/Sorry, We're Closed!** sign until 10 on the dot.

10:00:00.

She flipped the sign.

She threw the deadbolt too; she always did when it was just her in the diner. The light switches were next, casting the diner into blue shadows. As she hung her apron behind the counter, a car pulled into the parking lot, its headlights illuminating the dark diner, and Katherine suppressed a sigh. It was never fun to have to tell customers they were closed (but you're still here! We only want a milkshake! Please?), but tonight especially, she was in a hurry to get out of the diner.

Sure enough, a minute later, there was unrepentant tapping on the glass door.

She was surprised to recognize the silhouette in the door.

*It's the hair.*

She crossed back over the diner, clicked the deadbolt back, and stepped aside; Steve shouldered his way into the diner.

"I figured it'd be better than having to sit in the driveways," he said in lieu of a greeting.

She swung the door behind him, re-locking the deadbolt out of habit. "Pick a seat, any seat."

Steve picked the counter. There was a bankers light over the register, so Katherine reached over the bar to pull the cord and switch it back on. The diner was still bathed in cool blues, but the yellow ring from the light covered the counter. She pulled her feet up under her on the barstool, balancing; Steve was facing the counter, his feet tapping lightly on the foot rest bar.

"Alright, so, before," he turned to look at her, gesturing vaguely to the space in front of him, "anything else, thanks for the essay."

Katherine blinked, surprised. "Did you get to look it over?"

He hesitated. "Um, no. Not yet. But I know whatever you did it better than how it was before."

"You don't know that."

"Come on, Kat, we both do."

*Okay, so, we do.*

"Well, tentatively, in advance, you're welcome."

He seemed satisfied with that, and pulled back from the counter to rest his palms on his knees, lifting his fingers. "And I didn't mean to be scarce, I just have been really busy with apps and everything..."

"That's fair," she said carefully, "But almost a week, Steve?"

"Yeah, I know. I didn't mean to stress the guys out."

"And me?"

"Or you. But we don't really," he paused as he worked on choosing his next words, "cross paths much, do we?"

*Ouch.*

"We definitely didn't this week," she said noncommittally. "So you came out to Ronnie's at 10 at night to tell me you were just busy."

He nodded stoically.

*I really shouldn't push my luck...*

"And," she pulled her hair over her shoulder, examining the end of her ponytail in front of her, "Barb has nothing to do with it?"

He didn't say anything, but his fingers froze. He worked his jaw, and he looked down at his hands. "I, uh, don't know what you mean by tha—"

"I don't either, it's just what Dustin said."

Steve huffed. "Yeah, well, he shouldn't have."

"But he did. And, a rhino ain't a wombat, so what gives?"

"A what now?"

"Which, the rhino or wombat?"

"Either?" Steve shook his head, "I mean, neither; I know what they are. But what did that mean?"

"It means that if Dustin was way off base, you wouldn't be gripping your knees like they might dislocate if you let go. And you'd let yourself breathe, and you'd look me in the eye while you were at it."

His hands started up again, he took a gulping breath and looked towards her. Well, at her hairline.

"Steve, that's, like, not even 30% convincing."

"What do you want, a therapy confession?"

"I'd like it if you didn't stop me from closing the diner if you were just going to lie to me!"

They stared at each other for a long moment, the Steve let out a short breath, raking a hand through his hair, hopping up from the stool to pace in front of the counter. "You want me to say I'm still upset that one of our classmates is dead?"

"I didn't say that—"

"Oh, right, you just wanted to know what's relevant to you."

Katherine recoiled. "Hold on, that's not fai—"

"Isn't that why I'm here?" Steve held his arms out, extending them to the empty diner, "Because you wanted to know why I left?"

"I wanted to know you were okay," Katherine said sharply. "I didn't know that was such an imposition."

"Well you sure didn't believe me when I told you that I was."

"Because clearly you're not!"

"I'm fine!"

She crossed her arms and they glared at each other; she perched on her stool, and he standing between the aisles of booths in the diner.

Katherine studied him. "So where does Barb come into this?"

"You were the one who brought her up."

"Yeah, because Dustin let it slip that Joel had mentioned her parents —"

"That her parents are selling their house because their daughter was murdered and nobody did a damn thing to stop it?" Steve resumed his pacing, "Yeah, Joel 'mentioned' it."

*Murdered?*

Katherine's eyes followed his nervous pacing. "I...I thought she died of exposure. From that chemical leak."

"Right." Steve stopped short. "Freak accident, murder, same

difference. Either way, she's dead."

She didn't know what to say.

When Barb had disappeared, it had thrown the school into a weird funk. Barb wasn't really the popular girl, but she also didn't have enemies; even if she wasn't on anyone's radar, it didn't mean they wished her dead. Things had crept back to normal, but there were moments when the school seemed to remember.

"I didn't know you were close," she offered.

"We weren't."

*Oh. And that's what makes it worse.*

She unfolded her arms, gripping the sides of the stool. "Steve, I don't know what sort of survivor's guilt this is, but you know it's not your fault. Nobody but the scientists in that lab could've kept Barb from..." she hesitated, the word was never easy to say, "from dying."

Steve was staring at the ceiling, his fists clenched at his side. He dropped his head and as his hair flopped in his face, Katherine realized he still wasn't looking at her. When he spoke, it was so quiet that she almost missed it.

"That's what everyone says," he mumbled.

Katherine slid her legs out from under her. "That's because they're right," she said as gently as she could.

Steve tilted his head back, and his eyes finally lifted to meet hers. Katherine drew in a quick breath at the depth of emotion in them, before Steve looked away again. "No," he said, in the same small voice, "it's because they couldn't have done anything."

She thought about it for a moment before slipping off the stool and coming to stand in front of him. He still didn't look up, but at least she would hear whatever he said this time. "Steve, you're included in that 'everyone'. There's nothing you could do, either."

He shook his head again. "Thanks, Kat, but you really don't know

that."

"Look at me. Hey, look at me," she ducked her head so she was between his gaze and the floor. When she straightened, his gaze rose too. "There, that's better. I know I'm not great company, but I think I'm a better view than the floor, okay?"

"You're fine company," he muttered.

"Mmhmm. So, what aren't you telling me?"

He shifted. "Nothing."

"Bullshit," her voice cracked, and she raised her chin defiantly. She never swore, but if this was the way to get him to listen to her, then so be it.

His jaw clenched, but she didn't back down.

"Kat, it's not—"

"It is that simple. What is it that I don't know?"

His eyes searched hers and she couldn't figure out what he was trying to read in them.

*I want to know.*

Whatever had driven him out of the diner, away from her friends, away from her, it was bigger than he could carry on his own.

*I want to help.*

She had two good shoulders, and while they weren't enough for Hawkins High Athletics, they were wide enough and strong enough to help carry whatever was weighing him down. And she realized, more than anything else, what she was trying to say here.

*I. Am not. Her.*

She didn't know what Nancy had said to break Steve that night of the Halloween party, didn't know what sort of falling out they'd had since

then. And Nancy really did seem happy with Jonathan, so it wasn't like Katherine held it against her. It was that she could see it on Steve's face, the way his eyes kept drifting to her hairline, to reinforce the disparity in their images. Something told her that no one else had asked him, pushed him, read him, before Nancy, and no one had since. And now here she was, and she couldn't think of how to wordlessly communicate that she wasn't the girl he was still not over, so she just met his gaze.

His shoulders dropped.

"I could've stopped it," he admitted.

She didn't buy it for a moment, but the denial method hadn't worked so well, so Katherine tried another way. "How?" she asked.

"I was there."

"At the lab?"

"No, not at the lab, at," Steve clenched his teeth together, "at my house."

"At your house?" she repeated flatly.

"Yeah. Barb drove Nancy over for a couple drinks, since my parents weren't home. We...we let her drive home alone. We were...we were the last ones who saw her."

Her mouth opened; she hadn't expected that.

*Okay. Okay, so what?*

So he was the last person to see her. So, since Nancy stayed, that meant Barb was alone. But that didn't push Barb towards the chemical spill, didn't mean he was at all to blame for the fact that the scientists let their experiments take precedence over the life of a high school girl.

"Steve," she shook her head. "You know that doesn't mean it's your fault. You have to know that."



"Oh yeah? Then whose is it?"

"I-It's the scientists, the—"

"Did they push her to drink? Did they leave her on their porch? Did they go upstairs and not care about what happened to her?"

"That's not what you did—"

"How do you know what I did?" he shouted, backing away from her. Both his hands were on his head, clutching it.

Katherine didn't know why, but suddenly her eyes were burning.

"I invited her over, Kat. I did that. She was out that night, and if it weren't for me trying to impress Nancy, she'd still be alive."

"Steve—"

"I was in my house, Kat, I was safe. I was worried about my parents finding out about the beer, and about what Nancy thought of me, and all the while...she was dying. Barb died. Alone."

*He genuinely thinks he killed her.*

He was breathing hard, and she wasn't sure if it was just her vision clouding, or if his eyes were shimmering too. Something in her heart just clenched, and she realized that Steve being alone didn't mean lonely Friday nights. It meant nobody to dig their heels in next to his, nobody to lean their backs against the weights he was strapped too. Nobody to fight his demons.

*Oh Steve, how long have you carried this?*

The diner was still, the shadows long and the King of Hawkins, wavering in the blue light.

"You were inside and safe while she was out?" she asked slowly, needing to clarify.

Steve's hair bounced as he nodded.

"She was driving around, and that's how she got exposed? While you were home?"

Again, he didn't make a sound but nodded his affirmation.

She tucked her hands into her back pockets, rocked back on her heels, and shook her hair out of her face. "Alright. Then I killed her."

Steve's head shot up. "Kat, what—"

"I was home, Steve, right next door. While you were drinking, I was minding my own business, not bothering. I probably rolled my eyes at how loud you were being, but I stayed put didn't do anything. I killed her."

"You know that's not—"

"What's worse," she interrupted, words flowing out of her, "is I bet I was working that night. So chances are, I was driving too. But I'm the one who's here, and she isn't."

"Damnit, Kat, it's not the same—"

"Like hell it's not!" she cut him off again, surprised that her voice was shaking. She steadied herself and lowered her voice. "Because if driving alone or being home on the night Barb died is what killed her then I am JUST as guilty as you are."

"You're not the one who—"

"Tell me what you did, Steve!" She wiped angrily at her face, realizing it was wet. She stepped closer to him, rising on her toes, "Tell me one thing you did that night and I promise, I PROMISE, that I did it too." She realized he hadn't moved. He was staring at her, a desperate expression on his face; this was probably the first time he'd let himself feel this much about it.

She took a final breath. "Look me in the eyes and tell me, Steve Harrington. Because if you won't let me hang for it, then there's no way I'm letting you."

"Kat..."

She hadn't been imagining it; he blinked rapidly and shoved his sleeve in his face.

"You," she lifted her arm again and poked a finger at his chest. "Did not kill Barb. Do you hear me? You. Did not. Kill her."

He was silent for a long moment, and the diner was quiet except for the sound of their stilted breathing. She watched every emotion race across his face: conviction that he was a murderer, hope that maybe he wasn't, indignation that she would tell him so, doubt that she could be right. The truth of his reality waged with the logic of her argument, and she saw the moment his jaw went slack as he let it go.

His shoulders dipped imperceptibly, and she reached for him.

He was a good deal taller than she was, but her hands found the back of his neck, pulling his head down to her shoulder. Her arms stretched around his neck, cradling him, and he hesitated for a moment before his arms wrapped around her waist.

He was shaking, and she held him, listening to his uneven breathing and trying to steady her own. It wasn't long before her arms went numb from the angle, but she wasn't letting go for the world.

"It's okay...you're okay...it's going to be okay..." she whispered it over and over again, repeating it, meaning it. It might be hours until the man in her arms believed it, but she wouldn't stop until he did.

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**A/N: So this one was a little longer! Steve feeling feels is my hope for ST3, so it manifested itself in this chapter. Please review (seriously guys, I need some input here); can't wait to write the next one for ya!**

## 8. Chapter 8

When Katherine answered the insistent knocking on her door, there was nobody there. She looked down, and there was Dustin.

"Yes!" he pumped his fist, and pulled a small radio out of nowhere; it crackled to life before he spoke into it. "Guys, she's the house to the left of Steve's. Converge."

"Um," she crossed her arms against the cold and stepped outside, letting the door fall closed. "You're at my house."

"Yeah. Steve said you lived next door, and we need your help."

"We?" she asked suspiciously, then registered what he'd said. "Please tell me you weren't just running around the neighborhood, knocking on doors and trying to find my house."

"Well, *I* didn't have to; you were my first pick."

"That's something, I guess."

"But Lucas likes the dog from the house on the other side of Steve's, and Max says that that house across the street really should fix the latch on the gate because she could throw it in her sleep, and Will says—"

"I'm going to stop you there."

He nodded agreeably, rocking back on his heels and looking around at her porch. "That's a lovely boxwood."

"It's plastic," she said absently, "But thanks. Wait, who all is converging?"

"The party."

"The party...like you're getting one started?"

"What? No, come on."

She leaned against the door shut door. " 'Potent engines, by which cunning, ambitious, and unprincipled men will be enabled to subvert the power of the people', that's what Washington thought of political parties."

"Washington?"

She blanched. "George. Oh my god, you know all the species of frogs in India, but you don't know—"

"Oh calm down, I know who he is. I just don't get the correlation."

"Think about it."

He paused for a beat and then he nodded dramatically. "Got it."

"There it is."

"Was that from his Mount Vernon speech?"

"I'm impressed."

"And you decided to memorize it?"

"Pro tip, memorize stuff like that, then stick it in an in-class essay. Blows your teachers away."

"Good stuff."

"I won't even charge you for it."

"That's generous of you. Anyways, we're not that type of party either," Dustin held out his arms like he a ringleader. "It's just us."

*Did they choreograph this?*

Because suddenly, instead of one kid on her front porch, there were five. A skateboard and four bikes lay in her lawn and four faces stared curiously at her.

Katherine pinched the bridge of her nose. "Dustin, how did you know this was my day off?"

"I know things, Tracy, you've gotta learn that."

"He called the diner," said the kid wearing a bandana around his head. "I'm Lucas. This is Max."

The redhead tilted her chin up at Katherine, who found it impossible to not return the gesture.

"I'm Will," chirped apparently Will.

"And that's Mike," Dustin finished.

"Charmed," Katherine said weakly. "So, what, are you selling boy scout cookies?"

The joke fell flat and Katherine watched, in order: Dustin wish she hadn't said it, Max snort, and the other three try to decide if she was serious.

The kid called Mike turned slightly to the rest of them. "I told you, we should just wait for Nan—"

"Come on," it was Lucas who interjected, "like your sister would want to drive us around town to—"

Katherine blinked. "Oh is there driving involved now?"

"Of course there's driving, Kat, that's why we're here," Dustin shook his head like it was obvious.

"Or we could just borrow your car?" Max volunteered, "I could drive, if that makes it better?"

"It absolutely does not," Katherine shot that down right away.

"Worth a try," Max shrugged.

"I still think we could hook up a wagon to one of our bikes—" Will tried diplomatically, but he was drowned out in a sea of 'we covered this', 'it's dark in an hour anyways', and 'nobody has a wagon that big' responses.

"Guys, we've settled this already. We need a car," Dustin said definitively.

After the quick progression of the conversation, it took Katherine a moment to recognize the silence, and that they were all looking to her.

"Okay, wait," Her hair was in a ponytail, but she ran her nails across her scalp, "Which of you is Nancy's brother?"

Four thumbs pointed at Mike.

"Which makes you," Katherine looked at Will, "Jonathan's brother, right?"

He nodded.

"And you're Steve's," she tapped the brim of Dustin's hat, pushing it down slightly. She left the elephant in the room alone, and Max seemed grateful for it. "I'm no mathematician, but isn't that three other cars you could catch a ride in?"

"It's a surprise."

"She's studying."

"They're studying."

"He's still at practice."

"And it's a surprise."

"She doesn't have a car anyways."

They all spoke at once, over each other, and Katherine's eyes narrowed. "One more time."

Mike took a breath. "Nancy's helping Jonathan study for some dumb history final, Steve has a late practice, and Nancy doesn't have a car anyways."

"It is a cumulative final," she mused.

"Besides, it's meant to be a surprise," Lucas added.

"Dustin said you could help us," Will looked hopeful.

She tilted her head. "If I can get past the presumption, that's almost endearing."

Max elbowed Lucas; an inside joke was buried in there somewhere.

Katherine looked over the crew on her porch.

She got one weekday off each the week, and this week it was Tuesday. Finals were Thursday and Friday and then it was winter vacation, but she had a lot of studying to do between now and then. Actually, between said history final, helping Josie with her outline for the English final, deciding if she was okay with her B in Chemistry or if she wanted to give up on sleep and try for an A, 'a lot of studying to do' was probably an understatement. And while making flashcards ad infinitum did not sound appealing, she did have a GPA to worry about...

Dustin was looking at her like if she didn't help them it might just ruin the rest of the year, and the start of the next, and she realized Will and Max were mirroring the expression, as well; she could feel herself wavering.

*Who needs an A in Chem anyways?*

She sighed, and reopened the door to grab her keys and wallet off the entry room table. "Okay, first rule: no disrespect for Annie. She knows when you're upset and it just makes things worse. Got it?"

They looked at each other. "Who's Annie?" Will asked.

"That," Katherine nodded at the behemoth station wagon in her driveway, "is Annie. She's old and temperamental."

"You're the *best*, Kat!" Dustin whooped, Lucas clapped him on the back, and they all swarmed towards the car.

Dustin took shotgun, and the other four wedged themselves into her backseat; Katherine had to readjust her mirrors to see over the top of



Mike's head. "Rule number two," she looked over her shoulder at them, "seatbelts. I don't care if you have to sit on top of each other or if you lose feeling in your legs, you'd better be strapped in."

They complied.

"Alright, boys and girls, throw out and a Hail Mary and call in any favors you're owed..." It took two tries, but the car sputtered to life, and Katherine patted the wheel fondly. "See, she did just fine."

Max looked like she had a contradictory opinion, Will looked thrilled to be adventuring, and Dustin was fiddling with the radios again.

"So," she threw the car in reverse and started snaking out of the driveway, "Where are we headed?"

"Sambol's Tree Farm."

Katherine braked involuntarily and everyone yelled as the car lurched; she punched the clutch and downshifted just before it died.

She cleared her throat. "We're going to get a Christmas tree?"

"Unless you think we could get two?" Dustin asked, perfectly serious.

"No no," Katherine shook her head, "I think one is plenty."

"Yeah," Lucas looked temporarily resigned, "We probably shouldn't push it..."

Mike drummed his fingers on the window sill. "Do you know where it is?"

"I think so, but why don't you navigate for me, just in case?"

He nodded stoically, and they were off.

By the time they'd pulled out of the suburbs and were winding their way down the highway, there were no less than six separate conversations flying around the car, layering on top of each other: Lucas and Dustin were trying to figure out which channel was best for the radios, Will was describing to Mike the best and only popcorn

garland procedure, Max was convincing Dustin that she couldn't count the number of ways that wax candles on a live tree could go wrong, Lucas was yelling that mistletoe was a poisonous leech of a plant and not at all romantic, Mike was calmly dictating directions and mileage updates, Will was chiming in trivia about different farms as they passed, and Kat was trying her hardest to not get a headache. She gave up and added her voice to the fray.

"So, who's the tree for?"

"The party."

"That's sweet that you guys are doing a tree together."

"No, for the Christmas party."

"Come on, Tracy, keep up."

"Next left, in a mile or so."

"Don't worry about it, Kat. What you *should* worry about is, oh I don't know, open flame on a porous wood!"

"There are sixteen different types of pine more flammable than the common Christmas tree. Have we tried channel 14?"

"Only a dozen times. Maybe 32?"

"Half a mile, Kat!"

"Thanks, Wheeler."

"Flammability is not a relative scale!"

"I think we should use floral wire instead of string; it'll cut through the cranberries easier. It won't be as swoopy, but that should be okay."

"But why is it that a parasite is a symbol of romance and happiness?"

"The junkyard is that way, too, I think."

"Usually it's good to let the popcorn sit for a day or two so it gets

stale and not so crumbly, but I put some out this morning and Mom keeps the house super hot now, so we should be okay."

"It literally kills groves of trees but we slap a bow on it and call it festive."

"What about channel 17?"

"Don't even get me started on eggnog—"

"Left, Kat!"

When they pulled into the lot, it'd been a twenty minute ride, but Katherine could swear it was twice that.

The party—she still didn't know why they referred to themselves that way, but she certainly knew that she was in too deep to ask—spilled out of the car. The kids fanned out over the lot, dodging in between the pre-cut trees, and straight into the rows of the still-growing trees, calling to each other when they found their favorites and standing next to them to get an idea of their height.

Katherine hung back in the car, unsure what her role was in this. She didn't have a winter coat like the kids did, so she pulled the blanket Sofia had folded in the back seat. Figuring she really didn't need to worry about her image, she wrapped it around herself before taking a fortifying breath and leaving the warmth of the car.

The kid working the Christmas tree booth couldn't have been any older than the kids she'd come with; Katherine headed towards him.

"So how does this work?"

"It's \$15 for any tree under 10 feet, and \$25 for anything taller," he recited.

*That's a shift at the diner.*

She hesitated, then remembered the distinctive jingling of pockets when the kids piled into her car. They probably had the \$15, just in nickels and quarters. And while she was sure Sambol's Tree Farm accepted all forms of currency, she reached for her wallet anyways.

*If Steve has had a crap year, I bet theirs has been worse.*

While it was true that Will had come back from the dead, that still couldn't have been easy. Especially now that she saw how small Jonathan's brother was, and how closely the others watched him. And then all that with Billy, and it was Christmas after all... she handed a couple of folded bills to the kid.

"Cool. Want a stand?"

*Do we?*

"Um, no. No, I don't think so."

"Okay. There's twine down around the trees, so you can strap it to your car. And then, here you go," the kid disappeared behind the counter and reemerged wielding a bow saw.

Katherine gingerly took it from him. "Em, thanks."

He nodded seriously.

She turned back to the lot, trying to see the kids through the rows of trees. She could pick out Lucas' bandana chasing the red of Max's hair; she smiled to herself. It occurred to her that that was why Billy didn't like redheads, but she brushed the thought away. If her hair grouped her with Max, she figured she was in pretty good company. Will was flitting excitedly between trees, seeing something he liked in another and running towards it; Dustin was stopping at each tree, carefully considering the virtue of each one.

"Mike!" everyone's head lifted at Will's call; he waved his arm for all of them to come over, "What do you guys think of this one?"

They all darted towards him, and even Katherine broke into a jog. By the time she'd got there, they were clustered around the tree, murmuring their approval to each other, pulling on branches and nodding excitedly.

"What do you think, Kat?" Dustin asked reverently.

*It was a pretty tree.*

The sign at the end of the aisle told her that it was a Frasier Fir; it had shiny needles and plenty of space between the branches for ornaments. The whole lot smelled heavenly, but this one seemed fresh and happy. It was shorter than some of the others, but Will looked so delighted with it that nobody seemed to mind.

Katherine held up the saw. "Who wants the honors?"

Max grabbed for it, but soon they were all taking turns, Katherine holding the top while the boys sawed away at it.

*Many hands really do make light work.*

She stepped out of the way, and it fell with satisfying grace. She gave Dustin the saw to walk—don't you dare run with that thing!— back to the booth, and everyone else leaned into dragging it back up the hill.

The truly herculean task was getting the tree onto the roof of the car, but they managed by tying a series of knots around the peak of it, and everyone pulling from the front of the wagon, while Katherine lifted the trunk above the spare tire. They had it rigged up like a balloon in the Macy's parade, lines being held in every direction, while Katherine and Will cranked down the windows to thread the twine through. When they were done, everyone's nose was tinged red and Katherine didn't think she'd ever get the pine needles out of the blanket, but the kids looked incredibly pleased with themselves, and truthfully, she couldn't say she minded.

The ride back was much colder due to the cracked windows, but the kids were packed in tightly in the back, and Dustin had her blanket in the front, and it was no less lively a trip.

"SHIT!"

It was Mike who yelled it, and the car quieted; Katherine tried not to read too much into the fact that her first instinct was to check her mirrors for red and blue lights.

"Dude!" Dustin whipped around in the seat. "What the hell?"

"Seatbelt!" Katherine insisted, shoving Dustin back. "There were two

rules, come on now."

"Well?" Lucas prodded Mike, who was turning around to check behind them.

"Did we just steal the tree?" he looked panic stricken and everyone else seemed stunned.

Katherine let out a relieved breath. "Mercy, Wheeler. I thought we'd hit something."

"They...they just let us go, though," Will said, looking around the car, "That can't all be our fault if they just let us go? Right?"

"They didn't let us go; I took care of it." She tried to say is casually, but if the car was quiet before, now it was positively noiseless, save for the wind whipping through the cracked windows.

"Merry Christmas?" she offered.

"You don't know any of us," Max said slowly, "Why would you do that?"

*Because you guys are too young and this year was too long for you to be spending your money on a tree.*

"She's Steve's friend," Dustin beamed proudly, answering before she could.

"What, like Steve would've bought us a tree?"

"Okay, maybe not, but she is gainfully employed."

"Mostly," she interrupted before the conversation derailed, "because I didn't want to stand in the cold while you lot emptied your pockets to count out the change. Don't worry about it, guys."

She watched them exchange glances in the mirror, then Lucas coughed.

"Well, thanks."

The others murmured similar sentiments and Katherine felt her mouth turning up into a smile.

"You're welcome. So, where are we taking this thing?"

Everyone chorused that they were going to the Byers house, and Mike agreed to give directions again.

"My grandma says 'mercy'," Dustin mused, and Katherine swatted at him with the hand not on the wheel.

She'd kind of expected to drop off her passengers/the tree, and then get back to her studying, but once she was inside the Byers' house, she realized her notecards were dancing farther and farther away. They wrestled the tree into a corner of the living room; she held it steady while Lucas and Max got to work in securing it in the stand. There were boxes stacked against a wall, and Katherine realized that each of the kids had brought decorations from their houses. Mike carried armfuls of lights into the living room, Dustin started cutting out paper stars, and Will started on his popcorn garland.

At some point, Katherine found herself sitting on the floor, sorting ornaments, at Will's instructions, into (1) pendant, (2) pictures, (3) circular, (4) other, piles. Someone settled beside her, and she glanced over to see Mike, working on the tangled string of a gingerbread man ornament.

"So, what kind of friend?" he asked.

"What?"

Mike focused on the tangle in his hands. "Dustin said you were Steve's friend."

She studied the top of his head, dropping two baubles into the pendant pile. "Why do I feel like this is a trick question?"

He glanced up at her, then bent over again. "It's not."

*Which means it absolutely is.*

She tilted her head. "I think there's only one type of friend."

"There are lots of types of friends."

"Nah," she shook her head, "Lots of acquaintances, lots of peers, lots of classmates. But a friend is a friend."

Mike was watching her intently.

"No? You're not about that?" she shrugged, deciding whether a snowflake with Will's face in the center belonged in the picture frame pile or the circular pile. "Alright, then I'm a new one. How's that?"

Mike seemed to think that over, then he pointed to the frames pile, before dropping his in the Other stack. He rose off the floor, swiping his hands on his pants, and looking down at her. "That's good," he said at length, "he needs new ones."

She finished sorting the ornament box in front of her and reached for the next box, surprised when her hand met empty air, and that she'd gone through all of them.

"Hey guys, check this out!"

With a flourish, Dustin plugged the lights into the wall; the room lit up in the dancing colors. Lucas had been wrestling with the radio, and settled on a Christmas station with a tolerable amount of static; Max was rolled her eyes when he tried to get her to twirl around. Will was carefully taking ornaments from her pile and evenly distributing them across the tree, and Mike took Will's place with the garlands. Laughter rose, and Katherine admired the way the lights reflected in the bright faces of each of the kids. Watching them dance around the living room, laughing at each other, arranging ornaments and lights and garlands, she found herself smiling.

*What a happy family.*

She let herself sit for a moment longer, then caught Dustin's eye and motioned towards the door. He looked like he was going to say something, but she shook her head, and lifted a hand in a wave. He mimed like he was tipping his hat, and when the next song started up, Katherine slipped out. From her car, she could still hear the Christmas songs, and the flicker of the lights through the windows.



She couldn't shake the wistfulness.

Annie started up without a complaint, and the drive back to her house seemed especially quiet. Halfway home, she noticed the time on the clock on her dashboard and felt a tinge of guilt; she pulled into a KFC drive through and ordered two Dinner Plates. As she pulled into her driveway and the engine sputtered out, she looked up at her house. It was still, it always was. The light was on in the living room, where Dad would be reading a book.

She fixed a smile before she swung open the front door. "It's me," she called brightly, "Sorry I'm late. I brought dinner, though."

She stopped in the kitchen, transferring the KFC onto proper plates, and balancing them into the living room. Her father looked up when she kissed his cheek and set the plate on the table next to him arranging a blanket over his legs in the wheelchair.

"Hey, pumpkin. Did you have fun with your friends?"

"I did," she settled onto the couch opposite him, pulling her own plate into her lap. "How's the book coming?"

He held it up so she could see his progress along the tops of the pages. Katherine picked up her own textbook from the coffee table, trying to summon motivation to flip through it.

The sound of forks and knives on ceramic echoed through the house, and the lights above them cast the house in a melancholy light. Maybe that was just because the rest of the house was still dark. She pushed her mashed potatoes around, then set her fork down.

"I think," she cleared her throat, "after dinner, I'll get the tree out of the attic. And put up some Christmas decorations."

Her father looked up from the book, and smiled at her. "That'd be great, kid."

He flipped a page. She flipped a page.

Hers was a different kind of family, and that meant a different kind of happy.

Twenty minutes later, she plugged the tree into the wall; the lights at the ends of the branches sparkled and her dad clapped his approval. There wasn't a popcorn garland to be found, and there were only a couple of picture frames, but Katherine hummed to herself as she unloaded the box of decorations onto the tree.

## 9. Chapter 9

Having friends that didn't care who you were—basketball titan, someone to take Billy down a notch, big man on campus, whatever—was nice.

Scratch that, having friends at all was nice.

Actual friends, Steve figured, who didn't look over his shoulder when he was talking to them, to make sure someone else was seeing their conversation. Friends who talked about things and not against things, friends whose lives didn't revolve about what everyone else thought and who were so happy with themselves that it genuinely didn't matter what circles they moved in. Friends who really meant study when they said 'hey, let's meet up after practice, at the end of Katherine's shift to study'.

Of course, he didn't say any of that aloud, looking around the booth at Ronnie's.

Josie was explaining a calculus equation to a very desperate-looking Jeff and an equally bored-looking Travis; Sofia was holding up flashcards for an increasingly agitated Joel and correcting his pronunciation.

"I swear, Sof, that's what I said."

"No, you said boil."

"What?"

"*Hierva*, boil. *Hierba*, grass."

"I said that."

"No, you said hee-air-vuh."

"As opposed to?"

"Hierba."

Joel scowled and reached for his cards back. "It's a written final."

"It's not Latin though."

"So?"

"So people speak it. Get your Vs and Bs straight; it's not hard," she dropped the cards on the table, then ran a hand through her hair. "Anyone else need coffee?"

Josie shook her head vehemently, but the twins and Travis both stuck up their hands. Steve wanted some too, which meant they'd need more mugs than Sofia had hands, he followed her to the counter.

Kat was talking to an elderly couple at the other end of the counter, but she saw them coming, and grabbed a bunch of mugs from the kitchen window. She didn't break eye contact with the couple and nodded in agreement, but slid the mugs down the counter.

Sofia dropped a couple of bills on the counter and reached over to the warmer to grab a pot of coffee. "He'll forget all of it once the final is over," she muttered, waiting for Steve to catch all the mugs from Kat.

He pushed them together on the counter and Sofia unceremoniously dumped hot coffee into each of them, eying the steam warily.

"I don't know," he shrugged, "Probably not the difference between grass and boil."

Sofia snorted, turning to set the pot back on the warmer. "A girl can dream."

Steve followed the motion, waiting only a moment before saying, "He's got to know why you're so hard on him."

Sofia's hand slipped and the pot dropped with a bang; Kat turned with a warning glance, before going back to her customers when she saw that nothing had broken. Sofia pursed her lips and took a step back from the counter, turning the handles of the mugs resting there. "Because I want him to ace his final?"

*We're probably not good enough friends for us to talk about this...*

He picked up three of the mugs. "Yeah. That."

Sofia cleared her throat and picked up the last two. "I mean, what else could you mean?"

*Damnit, that coffee is way too hot.*

Steve set the mugs back on the counter, trying to figure out if there was a way for him to do this that didn't involve burning his knuckles. "If you stopped snapping at him," he said distractedly, "maybe you'd notice how hard he's trying."

"He's not trying." If Sofia observed his struggle, she wasn't sympathetic, watching him arrange the mugs like a shell game.

"He's trying." Steve gave up and picked the mugs up the same way he had before.

Sofia started walking back to the booth, shaking her head. "If he was trying he'd be good."

"Oh, you're still talking about Spanish."

Sofia's stopped abruptly, and Steve almost tripped, trying to swing the mugs around so he wouldn't spill coffee on her. Unfortunately, that meant it sloshed over the lip of the mug onto his hands; he bit back a yelp.

"Shit, Sofia—"

"Alright," she said turning, "What did Katherine tell you?"

He waited for half a breath, waiting for the heat to subside, and glaring at the sloshing coffee. "She didn't."

Sofia lowered her voice. "I'm serious."

*And I'm burning a layer of skin off my hands over here.*

Aloud, he said, "So am I; what're you looking for?"

Sofia's eyes narrowed. "She didn't saying anything. At all?"

"Well she does use her words—",

"Come off it, Harrington, I mean—"

"No, Kat hasn't mentioned your thing for Joel."

Sofia's mouth snapped shut and Steve could practically see her biting back her denial reaction (Thing? Whaaaaat no that's crazy. Pshhhhhh. Joel Ryan, who even is that?). If her arms were free, she probably would've crossed them, and instead she mumbled, "Nobody really calls her that anymore."

"Red herring."

She arched an eyebrow; Sofia absolutely knew that phrase wasn't in his vocabulary a month ago.

"What?" he muttered guiltily, "I had her work on my essay for a reason."

Sofia smiled amusedly, shifting her weight between her feet, then inhaling quickly like she was bracing herself. "Okay, how obvious is it?"

*Back to the Joel thing, I assume.*

"Not as bad as Jeff with Josie," he offered.

Sofia huffed. "That's not much."

"It's something."

"I guess..." She looked down at the mugs in her hands. "Did Katherine tell you about them, or did you get that one, too?"

"All by myself," he said wryly, "Give me some credit here."

Sofia was considering the mugs very carefully. "Do you think he knows?" she asked at length, and Steve didn't think she was really looking for an answer, just musing aloud.

All the same, he'd stopped feeling his knuckles, so time wasn't really of the essence anymore. He lifted a shoulder, talking to the top of her head, "I think if he didn't have some clue, he's letting you berate him about pronunciation for no reason."

"Passing Spanish is a good reason."

It was Steve's turn to huff. "Not that good."

Sofia smiled a bit, then nods slowly, heading back to the booth again. "Well, who knew?"

Steve ran the conversation back, came up empty. "Uh, who knew what?"

"You," Sofia turned again, just before they got to the booth, "aren't all dumb jock."

*I think there's a compliment in there somewhere.*

He shrugged. "I could've fooled me."

She wrinkled her nose. "False modesty doesn't suit you, Steve."

They set the mugs on the table, and everyone reached for their mug. Before Steve could get a word in to warn them about how hot the coffee was, Travis took a sip, then unceremoniously spat it right back into the mug. Sofia tittered, Joel clapped Travis on the back, and Jeff passed him an ice water.

Josie looked up. "What just happened?"

Travis grabbed for the ice water, cheeks flaming. "Hot," he managed between gulps.

"Thank you," Sofia passed him her water glass as well, "But I think she was asking about the spit take."

That got a laugh from the Jeff and a glare from Travis, and Sofia seemed pleased with herself.

Josie touched the side of one of the mugs and her eyes widened.

"Goodness, that's practically boiling."

Joel snapped his fingers. "Hervido," he said triumphantly.

Steve watched Sofia from the corner of his eye. After a pause, she smiled broadly. "Hirviendo," she corrected gently, holding out a hand, "It is boiling, *hervido* is past tense. I think you'd better give me those cards back."

Steve tried not to gloat too hard.

The couple at the counter left and as Kat's shift headed into the last half hour, she came over to the booth, grabbing a chair from a nearby table and sitting backwards on it. She stole some of the m&m's from the trail mix Josie was snacking on, wrinkled her nose at the amount of sugar Joel had dumped in his coffee, and asked for a pencil after a glance at Steve's outline for the in class essay.

"That 7 should be a 9," she said quietly, tapping the middle of the page. She hadn't meant to interrupt any of the other conversations at the table, but Josie heard nonetheless.

"I didn't know you were working on Calc, too."

"Take it easy on him, Katherine," Joel tuned into the conversation when he saw Kat being handed a pencil, "Mr. Keating won't care if he misspelled something."

"Maybe," she erased something in the middle of the page, "but I bet he cares about the French Revolution ending in 1789 instead of 1787."

"Just say 'at the end of the 17th century'; that's what I always do," Jeff shrugged.

Kat rewrote the '9' with a flourish. "And that's why you don't get A's on your essays."

Jeff held up a hand. "Alright, alright, so I'm no Katherine Tracy, but it buys me a couple extra years, and I'll get me a B, which is nothing to scoff at."



"If by a couple of years, you mean a hundred?" Josie asked carefully, punching numbers into her calculator.

"What?"

Kat bit her lip to hide a smile, Travis whistled, and Sofia said 'oh, honey' sympathetically.

Joel reached over to clap his brother's arm. "It's the 18th century, man."

Jeff blinked. "Are you kidding me?"

The bell over the door chimed, and Kat stood to flip her chair around, handing the pencil back to Steve. Everyone else was still enjoying Jeff's insistence that centuries didn't work that way, and Steve hoped no one heard him hiss when he felt a cool fingers brush across the top of his knuckles.

He looked over in surprise, and Kat was staring at his hands, red from the spilled coffee.

"Uh, it's nothing," he said quickly, grabbing the pencil back and then dropping his hands in his lap.

Kat pulled her own hands back, stuffing them into her apron. "Looked a lot more like a burn than nothing."

"Well that's odd," he said stubbornly, and Kat set her jaw.

"Oh, you guys are almost done with those waters!" Kat said loudly, and everyone stopped giving Jeff a hard time to look around for the cups Travis had drained.

Sofia waved a hand. "Katherine, you have an actual table to wait on; you don't have to—"

"Steve," Kat's voice was bright, like she'd just had an epiphany, "Would you take those to the counter for me?"

*Real subtle, Kat.*

But he smiled easily. "Sure."

"Thanks ever so much," she beamed at him, turning from the table, "I just need to seat this table and would hate to do it with full hands..."

*Save it, Tracy.*

He stood magnanimously and reached for two of the glasses. Sofia looked like she wanted to say something, but she let it go and handed him a third. He felt Kat's eyes on him as he crossed the diner, and heard her flip the notepad shut with a loud snap, then her footsteps follow him to the counter. She wasted no time in filling her table's drink orders, running it out to them, then slipping back behind the counter, grabbing an empty dish bin and stuck it under the spigot. Once it was full of the tepid water, she emptied what seemed like half the ice machine into it, then hefted it over to the counter. She dipped her fingers into the water, swirling them and testing the temperature. When her flurry of motion stopped, Steve realized she was waiting for him.

"Kat, it's nothing."

"Déjà vu."

"Really it's—"

"Oh for god's sake, just put your hands in the bin, Steve, this isn't a hard concept."

He complied, gingerly laying his hands across the top of the water. Kat rolled her eyes and pushed his hands under the water, pressing them to the bottom of the basin.

"Fifteen minutes," she glanced up at the clock, "Mark it."

"Kat, I already said—"

"Look, if I tell you it's a liability issue and not a..." she trailed off, "I don't know, an anything else issue, will you stop pretending you're not hurt?"

He hadn't thought about that.

Because that would mean that Kat was worried as an employee, and fussing because she didn't want to get sued. Trying not to think why that would make such a difference, Steve drummed his fingers under the surface of the water, then started picking at a bit of the plastic that had been scraped up at the bottom of the bin.

"Okay, seriously?"

He stilled.

Kat shook her head, but he was relieved to see a hint of a smile on her face as she took a towel to the counter, wiping off the icy trail she'd left. Her table was trying to catch her eye and she glanced quickly at the clock above the door, nodding to Frank back in the kitchen.

"14 minutes," she moved around the counter, "try your darndest to just be still for that long, okay?"

He drummed his fingers again, once she was gone, just to make a point to himself. But he left the plastic alone. He wouldn't admit it for anything, but the water was definitely soothing. Kat came back and handed the ticket to Frank, who seemed pleased it was just dessert, so he could keep shutting off the grill for the night.

"So you couldn't have just slapped some ice on my hands and sent me back to the table?"

She twirled from the cash register, looking back into the bin and touching the water with her fingertips, testing the temperature. "I could've," she twirled from the cash register, wiping her hands on her apron, "but I was feeling generous, and decided not to give you frostbite."

Steve blinked. "Ice on a burn gives you frostbite?"

"It's ice, Steve."

*Fair point.*

His hands had been flushed before, where the coffee has spilt, but now they were positively red underneath the cool water.

"That," he raised his eyebrows warily, "that's a sight."

Kat peeked into the bin and her hand flew up to her mouth to hide a smile. "My, that's practically festive."

"Yeah, you've got," he looked up at the clock, "11 minutes to enjoy this."

"I'll buy you a lobster tank for Christmas."

"What, so my hands can look at home?"

"No, so you can have an aquarium for their friends."

Steve snorted, and Kat walked over to the window to check on Frank's progress.

"Speaking of friends," Kat leaned her shoulder against the window, body turned towards Steve, but supervising her orders being made, "if I'd have known that editing your essay would somehow make me the emergency contact for a horde of middle schoolers, I would've thought twice before taking it."

"What, was Dustin here yesterday?"

Kat shook her head. "Nah, I didn't work yesterday; he swung by my house. Hey Frank," she continued in the same breath, calling back into the kitchen, "Remember, he asked for no peanuts on that banana split, right?"

*Did she just say house?*

"He did what now?"

"Hmm?" Kat turned back distractedly. "Oh, Table 6 requested no peanuts. He has an allergy."

Steve paused. "Uh. Okay, but I mean—"

"No, I know what you meant," Kat cut him off with a laugh, "Sorry, that was just set up too perfectly. But yeah, Dustin said that you'd said that I lived next door so they fanned out like a little search party

and checked every house adjacent to yours till they found mine."

"But you're right next door."

"And yet Lucas might dogsit for the Cooleys when they go on vacation."

Steve watched her profile carefully; she didn't seem upset about it. He could imagine it happening: Kat answering the door, and the gang all there, hopeful and chipper and not seeing anything abnormal about barging into her life, and it was kind of funny to think about. "You said 'they'?"

She nodded. "All five of them."

"Six," he said automatically, then bit his tongue.

Of course there weren't six, El was probably out at Hopper's. Which would mean the boys, plus Max, so five was right.

He cleared his throat. "Sick," he tried again, hoping she'd buy it, "Will's been sick lately, so I'm surprised he was there."

Her brow wrinkled a bit in confusion, glancing away from the kitchen at his obvious correction, but then rising up on her toes to reach over the counter for the sundaes Frank was already finished with. "Well, he was for sure there. Max offered to drive my car."

"She's actually a pretty decent driver."

Kat's heels hit the floor as she dropped from the window and turned back to Steve. "She's twelve."

He looked up at the clock, trying to figure out a way out of this one too. "Um, yes."

It wasn't his best, but he was trying to be noncommittal.

Kat's eyes narrowed and she set two sundaes onto the serving tray balanced on her shoulder. "Yes, you've seen her drive, yes you've let her drive, yes you know that it's highly illegal, or yes you know that it's highly dangerous?"

He tilted his head, trying to think to a fifth option before giving up and offering a, "Yes?"

"Unbelievable." Kat's grabbed the last plate and headed out to the table with two sundaes and a peanut-free banana split. On her way back, she passed a dish towel over the counter again, collecting condensation from the base of the bin.

She tilted her head. "Will didn't seem sick. I feel bad; I should've noticed that."

*Nice thinking, Harrington. I wonder if Will could fake a fever...*

He focused on his submerged fingers. "Nah, he's probably fine by now."

"Yeah, but running around in the cold wouldn't have helped him get better."

"Mrs Byers wouldn't have let him out of the house if he was too sick."

She hesitated, swinging the towel over her shoulder. "Okay, yeah, you're probably right on that."

*Never thought I'd hear her say that.*

"So he was outside? What, were they caroling or something?"

Kat snorted. "Think about that."

"It seemed a better ask than 'so what did they want?'"

"A chauffeur," she said breezily, checking the clock and looking back in the basin. "Three more minutes; how're you feeling?"

He kept his hands submerged, but moved them back and forth along the bottom of the bin. "Like my hands were burned and then sunk in ice water."

"Not ice water."

"Cold water," he amended, watching the ripples spread. "What did

they need a chauffeur for, when they all have bikes?"

"Not to haul Christmas trees, that's for sure."

Steve's hands stilled. "That was you?"

"What was me?"

"The tree. You went and got them the tree?"

Kat pulled the towel out again, wiping over the same spot she'd cleaned a moment ago. "I went with them while they picked out their tree, yes."

She was wording it carefully, and Steve had heard a different version from Dustin. The kid had called excitedly to let him know that he'd have to come see it sometime after finals when he had time. Dustin said they'd gotten a great tree and they hadn't had to pay for it because he guessed Christmas made people feel charitable; Steve had just assumed the Wheelers or Sinclairs had footed the bill. It sounded like something Lucas' family would do to be festive, or Nancy's would do, if Mike asked loudly/long enough. It was something family or best friends would do, not Kat works-at-a-diner-to-support-her-and-her-father Tracy.

*No, it sounds exactly like something she'd do.*

"You didn't have to do that," he said slowly.

She folded the towel meticulously. "Oh come on, like you could say no to driving them out to Sambol's."

"You know that's not what I meant."

"Isn't it?"

He shook his head. "How much was it?"

Kat shook her head right back. "You know, that's the funny thing about finals; my head is so crammed full of little details that I forget the most random facts."

"Kat—"

"Hands in the basin, Harrington," she said casually, "You've got two more minutes."

He hadn't realized he'd lifted them out, and lowered them with a scowl. Kat was leaning back against the counter, her shoulder to him, studying her nails. Steve watched the second hand tick for a little longer.

"Why'd you do it, Kat?"

She pushed the cuticle back on her ring finger with the thumb of her other hand. "Good cheer."

"Kat."

"Steve."

"I'm taking my hands out."

"Sure you are," she switched to her pinky finger, "in a minute and a half. What happened, anyways?"

"Coffee."

Kat rolled her eyes. "You're kidding."

"Sofia stopped short and she was in a white sweater."

Kat looked over her shoulder to the booth. "She's definitely in a blue sweater."

"Would she forgive me if I spilled coffee on it?"

"Oh absolutely not."

"So it might as well have been white. Why'd you buy the tree?"

Kat sighed. "Dustin announced me as 'Steve's friend'."

"Okay, so?"



Kat shrugged like that was it. "So I bought the tree."

"That's a non-equator."

"Sequitur. Close, though," Kat tipped her head. "If it weren't Latin, that would actually be so close..."

"I'll stand by it."

"As well you should."

"Doesn't mean you had to buy a tree though."

Kat dropped her hands. "Not in a rude way, but why is this such a big deal to you?"

*Because none of my other friends would've done it.*

"Just curious."

She studied him for a moment, then nodded slightly. "If your year was hell, then I can't imagine what theirs was. Especially that Will kid."

*More than you know.*

"Especially that Will kid," he repeated quietly.

She was silent for a beat, then her mouth turned up slightly. "Time's up."

"Hmm?"

"Time," Kat grinned. "You made it 15 minutes, and no worse for the wear, right?"

Steve looked back at his hands. It wasn't like they looked better, or felt better, they just looked red and felt...well, actually, he couldn't feel them at all, but that was probably a good thing.

Kat pulled a towel out from behind the counter, folding it and laying it flat on the counter. "Hands on here; don't try to dry them off, just let them air dry."

"Why, would that give me frostbite too?"

"No, but it would do a tidy job of pulling off the top layer of your skin."

"There's a happy thought," he muttered, lifting his hands out of the bin and letting some of the water run into it. "Look, Kat, let me pay for the tree."

"Not a chance." Kat released the bin, stepping back and tucking a strand of hair back into her braid. "I'm going to go get my table's check. Then I'm going to start cleaning the rest of the diner, since we're getting ready to close. You're going to air dry your hands and then go ask Table 20 if they need any more coffee."

He was pretty sure Table 20 was Sofia and co.

"And if they do?"

She spun from the register, checking over the receipt as she walked around the counter. "You tell them 'tough luck', because we're closing."

He patted his hands gingerly on the towel, before heading back to the table. Luckily, no 'tough luck' was necessary; everyone was pretty over studying at that point, and packed up without much of a complaint. Frank turning off the lights in the kitchen and making a show of cleaning off the grill was enough of a passive aggressive message for Kat's table to leave, and Steve mock bowed to Travis, as he held the door open for all of them. Kat was locking the door when Josie yelped.

Kat dropped the keys. "Mercy, Josie, what was that for?"

"My pencil." Josie was halfway across the parking lot, holding her books in Joel's direction; he stepped forward to grab them—just in time too, as she would've let go either way. She was feeling the pockets of her jacket frantically, her breath coming in puffs on the cold air. "I can't find it."

Sofia had been halfway into Kat's car, but she pulled herself out; the twins got out of their truck to come back over.

"Don't worry, sweetie, we'll find it," Sofia said soothingly, looking at the guys with a pointed expression. "Right, guys?"

Travis, Joel and Jeff all muttered various forms of assent, spreading out over the dark parking lot. Steve pulled his backpack off his shoulder. "Guys, we don't have to, I've got some extra—"

"Time!" Kat interrupted quickly, locking the door. "Time to help look. For Josie's pencil. That's what you were going to say, right?"

Steve frowned when she came over to stand by him, scanning the ground. He didn't get the fuss, but he lowered his voice all the same. "I have like seven extra pencils; she can just have one."

Kat's voice was low too. "That's big of you, but will it be the pencil that she's been studying with?"

"Uh, no, it will be the pencil that has sat in my backpack all semester that I haven't used."

Kat grabbed his arm, pulling him with her into the parking lot, scanning the ground between Josie and the front door, "Then it's useless. Josie really believes that repetition is the key to success and she's been repeating— reworking problems, drafting outlines, writing timelines—with that pencil. She does this every finals season, starts out with a new one and it's practically just the eraser by the time she's done with it. It's like muscle memory."

Steve stopped short. "She's not going to leave without it?"

"She's not going to leave without it."

Steve raked a hand through his hair, looking over the parking lot. It wasn't huge, but it was dark, and on an incline, and Josie had been practically to the far end of it when she'd realized she didn't have her pencil. He sighed, digging into his pocket and pulling out the keys. "I think I have a flashlight, in my trunk, if that helps?"

Kat sighed, reaching for the keys. "Bless you."

Steve pulled them back, raising an eyebrow in question. "Hold up why do you get these?"

Kat sank back on her heels. "Because it's cold."

"...Yes?"

"Yes. So you can have fun rooting around and looking on the asphalt while I," she reached for the keys again, grabbing them this time, "Go root through your car for a flashlight that may or may not be there, where there's no wind."

Steve let her go.

Just as he heard the trunk open, there was a triumphant whoop; Travis had found the pencil. Josie was euphoric, Travis was proud, and Sofia got the twins to agree to give her a ride home, since she was closer to their place than Kat's. Everyone said their goodnights, and then Steve realized that Kat was still by his car.

He trudged up towards the car, trying to see around the lifted trunk to where she was. "Hey, Tracy, I kinda need my keys to—"

"What the hell is this?" Her voice was quiet as she interrupted him, and Steve realized what she was referring to before he rounded the car, his heart skipping a beat.

The bat.

He still kept it in the trunk, always kept it nearby, just in case. They hadn't had any issues since El closed the gate, and he knew that it wasn't much in terms of protection or whatever, but he kept it close all the same.

Sure enough, he rounded the back of the car and Kat was gripping the bat with her thumb and index finger, holding it away from her body like she hadn't meant to pick it up but now couldn't put it down.

"It's not what you think," he said, as calmly and convincingly as he could—which probably wasn't much on either count.

"Really? Because I'm thinking that you have a baseball bat in your trunk, with nails in it, okay," She looked back at the bat before wincing and looking back up at him, "And I'm trying really hard not to freak out, but there's blood and goodness knows what else on here,

so an explanation would be really great right about now."

*Shit.*

There was nothing he could say. Not without bringing up El, or the truth about Will, or anything having to do with laboratory. His mouth opened and shut for a couple of times before he realized Kat was watching him closely. When he didn't say anything, she dropped the bat, stepping away slightly, gripping her elbows.

"I-I don't know what you want me to do, Steve," she said shakily. Her knuckles were white, so tight was her grip.

"Kat, don't worry about it."

She blinked at him. "Don't worry? About the torture bat you have in the back of your car?"

"It's not a torture bat."

"Well it's not for softball, either," she said sharply, before looking away and pursing her lips. "Okay. Okay, I know stuff went down with that science lab, weird stuff that no one talks about because of Barb and Will and everyone. Are...are you in it too?"

"No," he said, but it came out too quickly. He raked a hand through his hair and tried again. "I'm serious, Kat, it's nothing, don't—"

"No, you don't get to do that," Kat shook her head, swallowing hard. "You don't get to decide when I do and don't care, whether it's convenient for you or not."

"That's not what I'm saying—"

"Isn't it?" Kat blew out a long breath. "I edited your essay, Steve. We helped you study for finals, we kept you from getting beat up by Billy again. God, Steve, I bought the kids a tree for you."

He frowned. "I thought that was because they had a rough year."

Kat pursed her lips. "Seriously?"

*Okay, yeah, that would make a lot more sense.*

Kat ran a hand through her hair, her shoulders falling. "I know you're new to this whole friends thing, Steve, but it means we trust each other. And we let each other carry stuff when we don't want to."

"Kat, I can't—"

"No, of course you can't," she said sharply, shaking her head like she was trying to shake herself out of it. "You know what, I have a final in the morning."

*Wait what?*

She couldn't be pushing by it that quickly.

But apparently she could, and Steve jumped when he realized she was back at her car, the door wrenching open with a shriek.

"Hey, hey, hey, wait," he darted around the car, catching the door before it closed. "What, you're just leaving? Are you...I don't know, are you okay?"

Kat tried for a second to pull the door shut, glaring at him when it wouldn't close. "I'm fine, Steve."

"You don't look fine."

"Gee, thanks."

"That's not what I meant," he said quickly, because it really wasn't. How did he even go about fixing something, when he didn't know why she was upset?

Kat was still, watching his face. She sighed slightly, her body sinking into the seat. "You know," she said thoughtfully, somewhat regretfully, "When you came into the diner after that middle school dance...I don't know, I thought it was a sign or something. Like we were supposed to be friends again, like when we were kids. And then you got along so well with everyone...I don't know, it seemed right."

He knew exactly what she meant.

Kat and her friends had been everything, after Nancy and all the craziness with the upside down. Being with people who genuinely seemed cool with having him around, was new for him, but so good. They didn't need an audience to want to be around him, they'd stay out in the cold in the dark, searching for a pencil in a parking lot, because that was the kind of friends they were.

And here he was, jeopardizing all that with a stupid bat.

He cleared his throat. "Why do I feel like there's a 'but then' coming?"

"That's up to you, I think."

Only it wasn't.

Because if it was up to him, he'd tell her, in a heartbeat. But it wasn't his story to tell, so he couldn't.

"Kat, I can't."

Her jaw clenched, and she looked forward, staring out the front of the car. "Then let go of the door, Harrington."

"Wait, we need to—"

"What? We need to not talk about it? "

Steve let out a quick breath. "If it helps, I'd tell you if I could."

"Yeah, you know, it really doesn't."

Something about the way she said it, it was like he genuinely didn't believe he would tell her if she could. And Steve knew she was just trying to process the bat, and she was tired and stressed from finals, but as he studied her profile, something welled up inside of him.

"That's not fair, Kat, you know it."

"What I *know*," she said sharply, turning to him, "is that I'm really freaked out by something, and you're not telling me about it."

"I already told you that I can't."

Kat was staring at him, trying to read his face, and he saw something pass behind her eyes. She took a deep breath, straightening her shoulders. "Just...please tell me you didn't just want someone to help with your essays or to get you into college."

Steve blinked.

She couldn't mean that, couldn't think that the only reason he stuck around was to use her and her friends. "W-what?"

"Tell me," she swallowed quickly, "that you weren't just here while it was convenient."

"Kat, where are you getting this?"

"You wouldn't have told me about Barb if I hadn't pushed. You wouldn't have had me meet any of the party if it'd been your choice. And now you're not telling me this."

"So?"

"So what part of friends don't you get?"

"What part don't you get?" Steve shot back. He was panicking, yeah, and he'd probably say something he'd regret, but right now he had to get her off the topic of thinking he was just using her. "Kat, I don't owe you an explanation for anything."

She sat back in the seat. "I didn't know we were keeping a ledger here."

"Really? Because that seems exactly like what you're doing. And then the second there's something you don't know, you just list everything off?"

Kat blinked. "I'm just trying to make sure you're okay—"

"Yeah, well nobody asked you to take on that role, did they? Up until a month ago, you didn't care."

"Are you serious?"



"Do I sound like I'm fucking kidding."

She recoiled, sitting back in the seat. "Let go of the door, Steve."

"You know what, no. You act like I'm the one holding out here, but you're not so high and mighty yourself. What, was I a charity case to you? Someone you tried to fix because you felt bad I came to school with a busted face? Is this a pity thing?"

Kat stared up at him, her expression unreadable.

Steve couldn't stop talking. The words were spilling out of him and he couldn't stop them; how was he supposed to fix this? How could he tell her that he wished more than anything that seven years was nothing? That he'd break the bat in half if she'd stop looking at him like he was guarding some horrible part of himself. He hated that she looked scared, hated that he didn't have the words, hated that this whole thing was a reminder of how much she cared when she definitely shouldn't.

But since he didn't know how to say that, his mind kept turning out words that he didn't mean. "If you're going to accuse me of just using you to get into college, then you tell me why you suddenly just decided to come back into my life. Why you're suddenly so involved, and what the hell makes you think that it's your job to take care of everyone's problems?"

The color drained from Kat's face and she lifted her chin. "Why do you think, genius?" she asked quietly.

*Shit.*

Steve's heart dropped; he was an idiot.

He was probably worse than that, for freaking her out, but for bringing up her mom.

He hadn't meant to, of course, but it was the only way Kat could take it.

*Shit shit shit.*

Everyone in Hawkins knew: Kat's mom had waited for her dad to be home from the hospital for a grand total of two weeks before she skipped out. She left a crippled husband and a 14-year-old kid with a stack of bills and a mortgage on a house in a neighborhood too nice for a waitress' salary. But Kat made it work.

Most people tried to tip generously, and her friends came to Ronnie's to see her, like it wasn't a big deal that she was never not working. But since Kat was a freshman in high school, taking care of other people was not only a character trait, it was what kept a roof over her father's head.

Steve's jaw clenched. "Kat, wait, I—"

"What?" she snapped. "What are you going to say, Harrington? Tell me quick, but you'd better make it pretty darn good."

*I'm sorry. I didn't mean...I wasn't trying...*

A thousand answers, one after the other, each more useless than the one before it, ran through his mind and Steve realized he couldn't speak any of them.

He thought of Dustin. And Will Byers. And Lucas Sinclair and Mike Wheeler and a little cabin out in the middle of the woods, and how Hopper had made them swear up and down that they wouldn't tell anyone, they wouldn't tell a soul, not even the tiniest thing that could point back to them.

And there wasn't an apology that he could preface this with, that wouldn't make it suck.

"Kat," he said, his voice hollow, knowing he had to and wishing he didn't, "You can't tell anyone."

Her jaw actually dropped when he said it, like she couldn't believe that after everything, that's what he followed up with. Then her face shuttered, and if he thought it was unreadable before, it was unbreakable now, and cold was never an expression he'd hoped to see on Kat Tracy's face.

"Don't worry," she spit. "I won't tell anyone."

He trusted her, knew she meant it and that she'd do it, but it didn't make him feel any better to hear her say it.

"Kat—"

"Oh, really, don't worry, Harrington!" her smile sharp, and she looked back up at him. "What are friends for?"

Steve took a step back, without even thinking about it, like he'd been socked right in the face, and the car door slammed shut with a squeal of protest. Kat floored the station wagon out of the parking lot, into the empty road beyond, not once looking back at him.